UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Acts of Identity: A Political Theory of Biography

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

by

William Samuel Stahl

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Joshua F. Dienstag, Chair

My dissertation, *Acts of Identity: A Political Theory of Biography*, is prompted by the puzzle: why have so many political theorists shown interest in the genre of biography, seemingly such a private and apolitical genre? I answer that biography is a powerful lens through which to analyze the link between individual identity formation and political action. I develop this answer through four chapters that engage with a selection of political theorists who have written biographic works. In the first chapter, I examine Hannah Arendt's claim that human beings are unlike other living things because each one of us develops a unique identity from the singularity of our biography. For her, who we are – and what makes us human – is what we say and do. In chapter two, I analyze Giorgio Agamben's challenge to Arendt: he concludes that what makes us human is not what we say or do, but what we have the potential to do. This implies that our biography does not define who we are or make us human. I agree with the latter implication, but not the former. While the form of human life may not be biographic, individual identity is. Henceforth, I argue that individual

identity is an artifact of language – a product of biographizing. In the third chapter, I illustrate this contention through two dossiers edited by Michel Foucault: *I, Pierre Rivière* and *Herculine Barbin*. These dossiers – the former about a "village idiot" who commits a terrible crime, the latter about an intersexed convent teacher who is declared to be a "man" after being raised as a "girl" – demonstrate that who we are is not just what we do, but the conceptual framing of what we do. In the fourth chapter, I argue for the democratization of biographizing. I engage with Jacques Rancière, who suggests that biography should adopt the style of modern literature, which treats all literary subjects as worthy of space on the page. In sum, *Acts of Identity* provides a novel account of biography that contributes to democratic theory and discussions of identity, action, and equality.

The dissertation of William Samuel Stahl is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2018

To Phi Hong Su

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the strong support of my committee. Giulia Sissa, Melvin Rogers, and Laure Murat have all shaped this work with their incisive comments and wealth of expertise, and I am grateful for their generosity and wisdom. I owe special thanks to Joshua Dienstag, my chair and advisor, who has supported me since I started at UCLA. I have learned an enormous amount from his mentorship and our many conversations. His good humor and empowering pessimistic spirit have enlivened and enriched my own thinking. I owe gratitude as well to my undergraduate professors and advisors at the University of Chicago: to Nathan Tarcov, whose seminars on Plato, Machiavelli, and Leo Strauss were a revelation; Julie E. Cooper, whose seminar on Rousseau still influences my thinking, as the first chapter of this dissertation clearly shows; and finally Patchen Markell, who advised my undergraduate honor's thesis. His mentorship and support at that crucial moment in my career has made all the difference.

The completion of this project has been made possible by the financial support of the UCLA Department of Political Science and the Dissertation Year Fellowship of the UCLA Graduate Division. In particular I would like to thank Joseph Brown for his extraordinary support.

In addition, I want to thank my peers and colleagues who have supported me as scholars and in friendship: Libby Barringer, Hollie Blake, Anuja Bose, John Branstetter, Andre Comandon, Arash Davari, Megan Gallagher, Emily Hallock, Naveed Mansoori, and Christopher Walker-Krisman.

To my family, who have always supported my education, no matter how far it has flung me across the globe, and above all to Phi: your love has made this not only possible, but worthwhile. You have brought a happiness into my life that will never cease to stun and amaze me.

VITA

William Samuel Stahl graduated with honors from the University of Chicago in June, 2009, with a B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy. After a year of service providing literacy tutoring and after-school programming at an elementary school on the South Side of Chicago, he began as a Ph.D. student in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 2017, he published "To Err Is Human: Biography vs. Biopolitics in Michel Foucault" in the peer-reviewed journal, *Contemporary Political Theory*. For the 2017-2018 academic year, he has been awarded the Dissertation Year Fellowship by the UCLA Graduate Division. For the 2018-2019 academic year, he will be in residence as a visiting scholar at New York University, Abu Dhabi.

Introduction

Political theory addresses questions of public concern. What is justice? What is freedom? Under what conditions may the exercise of power be considered legitimate and incur the obligation to obey? Given this, we are presented with a puzzle: why have so many political theorists shown interest in the genre of biography, which would seem to be such a personal and apolitical literary form? From Plato's episodic accounts of the life of Socrates to Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, political theory has often, and paradoxically, fixed its focus on the life of a single person.

The answer to this puzzle, I think, is that biography reveals the connection between individual identity and political action. It connects the "who" and the "what" of politics. More pointedly, it reveals that who we are is determined by what we do. This is evident from its form: the basis for a biographic plot is the course of action that an individual has taken through life. Through recounting an individual's course of action, a biography reveals to us who that individual is.

It might sound straightforward, but this formulation of the relation between identity and action is at odds with our modern commonsense understanding of what it means to be a "self." One of the defining features of the modern age in which we live is its subjectivism. On this, the genealogists of modernity can agree, whether they call it "emotivism" (MacIntyre 2007), "inwardness" (Taylor 1989), or bald "self-assertion" (Blumenberg 1983). One aspect of this inward turn is what J.B. Schneewind calls "the invention of autonomy" (Schneewind 1998). Autonomy is the notion that our outward acts are authorized by our inward selves. Thus, in this model, individual identity – the consistency of the self with itself – is the source of action, not the result.

The "invention of autonomy" has had an enormous impact on modern political thought. Liberalism, republicanism, and even critical schools of thought like Marxism and existentialism have posited autonomy, whether taken in an individual or collective sense, as a normative ideal. In liberalism, with its values of individual freedom and independence; republicanism, with its veneration of popular sovereignty; Marxism, with its goal of transforming the proletariat from a class "in itself" to a class "for itself;" and existentialism, with its anxious quest for authenticity, political action has been conceived as the self-expression of a determinate subject. In these models, political action is "correct" when it is an accurate and authentic reflection of the acting subject.

What I wish to argue, in this study of biography, is that things are the other way around. What we do is not a reflection of who we are. Instead, who we are is a reflection of what we do. We become who we are through what we do, and we have no identity until we have a story. In political terms, this means that we do not carry our private selves, already fully formed, over into politics. Our identity is formed, not in our own private thoughts, but through our role in public life.

This thesis is at odds with current identity politics just as it is with the ideal of autonomy. In contemporary political life, identity is often conceived in terms of categorization and labeling: an individual is identified with a particular class, race, sex, gender, religion, nationality, etc. However, while these labels may or may not accurately categorize "what" a person is, they do not tell us "who" a person is. To understand "who" someone is, we need to know their life story. We are more than the sum of our parts or a cross-tabulation of our characteristics. What animates us, what brings us to life and encapsulates our singularity, is the course of action that we take through life.

This thesis leads us to consider some uncanny and unorthodox ideas about our identities. First, when we reject the idea that we are autonomous actors, we have to give up the idea that we are the "authors" of our own lives. In other words, the study of biography teaches us that autobiography is an impossible aspiration. No one is the master of their own destiny. There is a simple reason for this: no one can predict all of the consequences of their actions, or how others will react. As actors, we share the stage with others, and this means that our actions are interactive; that what we do, and what happens as a result, is contingent upon how those around us choose to act. Because we cannot predict the outcomes of our actions, it is not until after the fact that we come to recognize what we have done and who we have become. Our actions write our story for us, of their own accord, without regard for who we might imagine ourselves or wish ourselves to be.

Second, this thesis defies our commonsense conceptions of shared identity and solidarity. From a biographic standpoint, our identity is utterly individual: it is our singular course of action. This singular course of action sets us apart from all others, no matter how alike, as an individual. Biography teaches us to distinguish this individuality – "who" we are – from "what" we are; from all the various categories and labels by which we associate or are associated with others as a group. This might sound problematic, or even like political suicide, especially for members of persecuted groups. Where is there room for solidarity, if we are to insist that each individual has their own fate? However, the biographic perspective is perfectly capable of perceiving the reality of linked fate, and moreover in a way that transcends any exclusive or essentialist notions of "groupness." In short, the biographic perspective teaches us, as discussed above, that what we do makes us who are, and that what we do takes place in a context of interaction with other human beings. That is to say, who we are is a product of our relations with others, and our own fate is linked with others'.

Third, this thesis suggests to us a particular conception of democracy that is premised upon the singularity and equality of actors rather than ideas of collective action or popular sovereignty. A biographic perspective acknowledges each individual as an actor, since it is their acts that distinguish them. Politics is seen as the contingent aggregate of individual actions rather than the expression of an authorial will. Democracy, in this picture, is less an expression of a substantial "we" than it is the notion that all individuals are equal political actors in a process of interaction. This does not mean that all actions have equal weight, but simply that all individuals are equal as actors.

Thus, in this political-theoretical study of biography, I will emphasize these three points: (1) that identity is shaped by action, or, in other words, that what we do makes us into who we are; (2) that action is an external process of interaction with other actors rather than the self-expression of one's autonomous inner self; (3) what makes democracy a possibility is not some kind of collective consciousness or popular will but instead the equality of individuals as political agents. In short, biography offers political theory valuable insight into the relation between identity and action while touching upon questions of individuality, autonomy, solidarity, democracy, and equality.

Biography, Autobiography, and Political Theory

Biography and political theory have a long history, dating back at least as far as Plato. Plato's dialogues, such as *Crito* and the *Apology*, present philosophical and ethical questions through scenes from the life of Socrates (Plato 1997). His life is presented as worthy of imitation in terms of philosophical method as well as ethical conduct. Plutarch's *Lives*, in a less philosophical vein, offers the lives of famous Greek and Roman heroes as exemplars of virtuous

or vicious conduct (Plutarch 2001). Meanwhile, Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus* (Xenophon 2001), a biography of sorts of Cyrus the Great, is an early precursor to the medieval "mirrors for princes" genre, in which one may include Machiavelli's *The Prince*, with its infamous biographical sketches of Cesare Borgia, Agathocles, and other controversial historical figures (Machiavelli 1998).

What these ancient and Renaissance sources have in common is the idea that biography is the portrayal of an exemplary actor, whether their actions are to be admired and imitated or hated and avoided. The moral qualities or the virtues and vices of an individual are determined by what they do and how they respond to circumstances. These choices form their character and decide their fate. The point of biography is to teach the reader which actions are to be praised and which blamed.

In modern political thought, however, biography has been largely supplanted by its offshoot, autobiography. With autobiography, the focus is not so much on an individual's actions as on their inner life: their intimate, otherwise unknowable feelings, thoughts, and passions. We may take Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the founding father of this genre, and his famous *Confessions* as its defining classic (Rousseau 1953). Though the title of this book evokes the spiritual diaries of Saint Augustine (Augustine 1992), Rousseau's purpose is not spiritual but secular: he is not on a quest to find God within himself, but rather to relate to his readers the intimate secrets of his own life.

In doing so, Rousseau revolutionizes the relation between action and identity. A notoriously unreliable narrator of his own life story, he justifies the errors, omissions, and misremembrances of his *Confessions* as an authentic portrayal of his soul, if not the actual events. He portrays himself as a beautiful soul, mistreated and misunderstood by a cruel world. With this

move, he claims a privileged authority over his life story and a special knowledge of his own identity that the mere events of his life could not reveal to the casual observer. In this way, Rousseau asserts authorship of his own life story, basing it on his sentiments rather than his actions.

While these intimate writings might seem removed from Rousseau's political writings, scholars have noted the political significance of his *Confessions* and its influence. Margaret Ogrodnick describes the book as an "affirmation of intimate life," of "authenticity," and of "self-creation" (1999), and Christopher Kelly calls the book a "moral fable" and Rousseau an exemplar of virtue (1987). Indeed, autobiography's emphasis on authenticity and self-expression have made it a vital form of expression for a range of modern political thinkers, from liberal individualists like John Stuart Mill (1960) to existentialists like Friedrich Nietzsche (1992) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1964). It has been especially important for African-American thought, from the classic slave narratives (Gates, Jr., ed. 1987) to W.E.B. DuBois (1982; 1984; 1999; 2007) to Malcolm X (1989), as well as postcolonial thought (Fanon 2008; Memmi 1991; 1992). These uses of autobiography speak to its emancipatory promise and its affirmation of the self over and against the injustices of society.

Compared with this list of autobiographic classics, there has been a dearth of strictly biographic political thought in modern times. The most significant exception to this rule – and the inspiration for this project – is the work of Hannah Arendt. In addition to her philosophical reflections in *The Human Condition*, where she argues that biography is the "specifically human" form of life (Arendt 1998, 97), she wrote several biographies, including *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Arendt 1997), *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt 1968a), and her extended profile of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 2006b). In these works, Arendt shows how identities are formed via engagement (or failure to engage) with the world. Individuals are actors

in a stage-play, and how they act determines who they come to be. What makes the stage-play of real life distinct from (and stranger than) fiction, however, is that there is no director, and no one, least of all any one of the actors, is the author of its unfolding plot. This implies that autobiography – being the author of one's own life – is an impossible task, an "absurd exercise" (Cavarero 2000, 24).

From Arendt's point of view, autobiography is impossible for a few straightforward reasons. First of all, it confuses the role of actor and spectator. Biographic subjects are not reliable witnesses of their own lives because they are too busy living it. We cannot see ourselves from the outside. Third-person spectators are in a much better position to witness – and judge – what we do. Second, and related, our ability to narrate our own lives is limited by two incontrovertible facts: we cannot precede our own birth or outlive our own death. Therefore, we can never tell the whole story. Someone else – a third party – is the only one able to tell the tale from beginning to end.

Beyond these reasons, however, Arendt notes a more serious problem with autobiography: it engenders an identity crisis. This crisis is in some sense the cautionary "lesson" of her biography of Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), a German-Jewish salonnière from post-Enlightenment Berlin. As a young woman, Varnhagen sought to escape her Jewish heritage through the cultivation of her inner self, inspired by Romanticism and in particular Rousseau's *Confessions*. In effect, this amounted to a denial and a retreat from reality in favor of the inner world of her thoughts and dreams. "Facts mean nothing at all to me," she wrote in a letter signed "Confessions de J.J. Rahel" (Arendt 1997, 91). In Arendt's telling of her life story, what "saves" Varnhagen is her mature realization that the reality of her circumstances defined her identity after all. It is this realization that awoke Varnhagen to the fact that, like everyone else, she was an actor, identified by her acts.

In this study, I follow Arendt in her vindication of biography and critique of autobiography. In doing so, I aim to emphasize that what we do makes us who we are, and not vice versa. We are not the authors of our own lives; our life stories are written by the course of action that we take in life. This course is ultimately unpredictable and is not primarily self-driven but rather interactive. As in Arendt, this critique of autobiography is connected to a larger political point: we, whether as individuals or a collective, are non-sovereign; we are not the autonomous masters of our actions. Politics is driven onward, not in accordance with anyone's will, but by an open-ended action-process.

Thus, biography, understood in an Arendtian vein, teaches us a number of valuable political lessons. First, it teaches us that identity is the result, not the source, of action. What we do makes us who we are. This lesson frees us from the trap of thinking that certain categories of people must act in certain ways, and generally makes it possible to consider individuals in a more open-ended way. Second, it teaches us that we are non-sovereign, that the effects of our action lie beyond our control. The point is not to divest individuals or groups from responsibility. The point is, third, that action is an interactive process, a contest of wills, rather than the expression of anyone's will. Thus, we should temper our expectations regarding our ability to "direct," "manage," or "control" political life. Lastly, biography teaches us that we cannot separate ourselves from this messy process. We become who we are through interaction. In isolation from this process, we are nobody.

Additionally, a biographic perspective shifts the burden from the biographic subject to the spectator. The onus is no longer on the biographic subject to "prove" their humanity to others or to "confess" the secrets of their innermost self. Instead, it is imperative that we learn to see each other as actors; that we acknowledge each individual, no matter how marginal, as a political agent.

Thinking with and against Arendt

As stated above, this study was inspired by Hannah Arendt's writings on and of biography. In my reading of these works and her thought generally, I am closely aligned with Patchen Markell. In *Bound by Recognition* (2003), he argues that we should temper our demand for recognition, in which we presume that we are the sovereign masters of ourselves, and acknowledge the fact that we are fragile and finite creatures whose intentions and actions are often met with surprise. Running through his book is a reconceptualization of the relation between identity and action in which action comes first and identity only afterward. In this tragic, "Sophoclean" notion of the self, Markell's work is closer to that of Alisdair MacIntyre (2007) or Bernard Williams (2008) than mainstream political thought. It is also consonant with the argument that I am undertaking here.

However, I should emphasize that this is a study of life, and how it takes shape, not death. Although our mortality teaches us the sober lesson that we are not the authors of our own lives, my focus is on vitality, and specifically our capacity for action. Thus, while I believe there is an affinity between my work and tragic conceptions of the self, I distance myself from work, such as Judith Butler's (2000; 2004; 2016), that emphasizes grief and death. Instead, I find myself closer to Bonnie Honig's work on tragedy (2009; 2010; 2011; 2013), which proposes the promising idea of an "agonistic humanism." This version of humanism, like Butler's "mortal humanism," emphasizes human finitude, but in a different sense. It is not the fact that we all die that is important, but the fact that we are all agonistic participants in political struggle. It is that we are all caught in the fray, so to speak, that reminds us that we are but human beings. Honig's "agonistic humanism" accords well with this study, although I'll have more to say about "humanity" in a moment.

But first, this study is not about the genre of tragedy and its political significance. Nor is it about Arendt's penchant for "storytelling" more generally, which is well documented (Benhabib 1990; Curthoys 2002; Disch 1993; Herzog 2000; 2002; Kateb 2002; Leibovici 2007; Luban 1983; Melaney 2006; Speight 2011; Wilkinson 2004; Young-Bruehl 1977). It is about biography, specifically, as an elementary and essential form of political thinking. Aside from Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000) and Julia Kristeva's *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative* (2001), there has been very little emphasis on this particular point. However, in my view, it is a necessary point to make: for Arendt, biography reveals who actors are and the meaning of what they have done. Thus, it is essential for the comprehension of political action. Furthermore, life stories are the single strands out of which the fabric of history is woven. There is no "process" or "logic" to history over and above the weaving-together of our life stories.

On this point, as with others that I have discussed above, I must state I agree with Arendt. However, my agreement is not unqualified, and this study is not simply a vindication of her ideas. I disagree with her on several specific but significant points, and to work out these disagreements I enlist the aid of a number of theorists with insights to contribute on the question of biography. These theorists are Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Rancière, and the issues on which they intercede regard humanity, methodology, and democracy, respectively. Below I will briefly outline how I engage with each thinker in order to productively resolve my differences with Arendt.

The first difficulty with Arendt's thought is her conception of what it means to be human. "The chief characteristic of this specifically human life," she writes, "is that it is full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography" (Arendt 1998, 97). That is to say, in other words, that our life story does not only determine who we are, it is what makes us *human*.

Thus, for Arendt, our humanity is bound to our identity, and both depend on our capacity for action. This is a problematic equation that threatens the anonymous and the passive with dehumanization. While I heed Patchen Markell's point that the distinction between Arendt's categories are fluid (2011), and I certainly acknowledge that for Arendt there is more to human life than taking action, it still seems to me to be the case that for her an anonymous, passive life would not be fully human.

To grapple with this problem, I turn to Giorgio Agamben. Though his work is in many ways indebted to Arendt, his conception of humanity as "potentiality" is practically opposite to hers. If Arendt requires human beings to "actualize" or "realize" themselves by taking action, Agamben argues to the contrary that our humanity lies in our potentiality as such. For him, it does not matter if we realize our potential because it is our very potential in itself that makes us human. For Agamben, human beings are human regardless of how they live or what they amount to in life.

In the end, Agamben's disavowal of human actuality leads him to disavow identity, too. If we are not to be identified with what we actually do but rather with what we could do, then we are not to be identified with who we are but rather with who we could be. As Lorenzo Chiesa and Frank Ruda put it, for Agamben it "is a matter of living the life that we live as if we were *not* living the specific set of events that compose our biography" (Chiesa and Ruda 2011, 172). By urging us to embrace our potentiality, Agamben asks us to disavow our actions and give up being who we are.

Agamben's disagreement with Arendt is productive but problematic. His idea of humanity as potentiality is an important advance. No longer is it incumbent upon individuals to "prove" their humanity by distinguishing themselves through action and making a name for themselves. Agamben is right to insist that humans are human regardless of what they do or who they are. However, in making this point, he goes too far, as if to argue that action and identity do not matter.

The solution to this impasse, I argue, is to disentangle our humanity from our identity. Human is "what" we are, not "who" we are; just as identity is "who" we are, not "what" we are. Furthermore, I would add that action does not make us human, but it does make us who we are. Agamben himself demonstrates this latter point, albeit negatively: his argument that we are not defined by what we do leads him directly to the claim that we cannot be identified by who we are. However, I do not agree with Agamben that we need to sacrifice our identity to save our humanity, just as I do not agree with Arendt that we need to rise above anonymity in order to become human. I think we should separate the question of what makes us human from what makes us who we are.

The second significant doubt I have with Arendt's work is her phenomenological method. The distinctions that she makes – for instance, between the activities of labor, work, and action – are rooted in a particular kind of "phenomenological humanism" (Hinchman and Hinchman 1984). This phenomenology posits that human life is conditioned by certain essential forms of experience. These basic experiences determine the limits of how we can live our lives and what we can know. But the trouble is, if our only access to these essential forms of experience is through our concepts, how can we be confident that these experiences determine our concepts and not vice versa? Indeed, how could it be possible to have a "pure" experience of the world unmediated by concepts? While these doubts might seem secondary to those voiced above about our humanity and identity, the solution I proposed to that problem makes it necessary to turn our attention to these concerns. If we can no longer appeal to human nature in our attempt to understand how we become who we are, then we need to adopt a method of inquiry that is agnostic about the question of human nature.

Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical method is an excellent candidate in this respect. With this method, Foucault intended "to free history from the grip of phenomenology" (2010, 203). Against phenomenology, he argued that we have no immediate, pre-conceptual

experience of reality because our experience is filtered by the knowledge we have. We can only experience what we know, and what we know is determined by the limits of our discourse. "Archaeology," in Foucault's usage, is the historical study of the development of discourse, with special attention paid to the ways in which different discourses make different forms of knowledge possible. "Genealogy" supplements this archaeological account by pointing to the power relations that influence the development of discourse. That is to say, for Foucault, knowledge is political, not neutral, and the contours of our experience are shaped and determined by the terms of this struggle.

From this perspective, the genre of biography is considerably more complex and open-ended than it is in Arendt's account. For Arendt, biography is more or less a transcription of what "really" happened: it is a linear account of the course of action that an individual took through life. There may be different perspectives on these events, but their underlying reality is never in doubt. But for Foucault, there is no such assurance. The biographic subject is an artifact of discourse. What someone did, and consequently who they are, is a question determined in discursive terms. Thus, two different discourses, with a different set of concepts, may identify an individual differently. Identity, then, becomes a complex and open-ended product of the politics of discourse.

Let me provide some practical examples of what I mean, taken from Foucault's own work. In the 1970s, Foucault edited two "dossiers" of archival material, the first entitled *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother …: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century* and the other *Herculine Barbin; Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. They have a similar structure: both juxtapose the autobiographic writings of their titular subjects with documents written by the legal, medical, and psychiatric authorities who administered their cases. What is interesting about this juxtaposition is that the

way these individuals identify themselves contradicts how they are identified by the experts. Pierre Rivière insists that he is sane, contrary to the findings of the psychiatrists; and Herculine Barbin, raised as a girl in a convent but compelled to change h/er legal status to that of a man after a medical examination in early adulthood, claims to be neither male nor female. Nonetheless, the point is not that Rivière or Barbin "speak truth to power," but that they provide a counter-discourse to the official one. Foucault does not see it as a contest between lived experience and abstract knowledge; he sees it as a contest between two discourses. Identification is revealed as a political act.

Thus, Foucault's biographical dossiers of these "obscure and ill-fated" individuals teaches us the lesson that biographizing itself is a political act insofar as it challenges hegemonic discourse. For instance, biographies that recount the life stories of marginalized and neglected figures might persuade us to consider them as political actors and thus, in a sense, as equals, for the first time. This suggests a powerful role for biography in democratic theory: shedding light on unsung actors.

This brings me to the last difficulty with Arendt: there is a democratic deficit in her thought. Her conviction that "every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story" is undercut by her distinctions between the activities of labor, work, and action (Arendt 1998, 184). Paradoxically, this can be seen in her admiration of the labor movement: "when the labor movement appeared on the public scene, it was the only organization in which men acted and spoke *qua* men – and not *qua* members of society" (ibid., 219). On the one hand, Arendt shows no elitism: anyone at all, regardless of their qualifications or status, can engage in political action. On the other hand, she is dismissive of everyone else, whether bourgeois or proletariat, who exist *merely* as social creatures. Those who simply "work for a living" fail to distinguish themselves. Those who stick to their social roles seem to her to be mere drones with no life story of their own.

To work against this tendency in Arendt's thought, I engage with Jacques Rancière's work. He has critiqued Arendt on similar grounds in several essays (Rancière 2010, 27-75, 205-218). Indeed, he has gone so far as to say that his own political manifesto, "Ten Theses on Politics," was written "as a critique of the Arendtian idea of a specific political sphere and a political way of life" (Bowman and Stamp, eds., 2011, 3). Rancière is committed to the idea that a democratic politics of equality can surface anywhere and anytime in a society and disrupt its hierarchical forms and norms.

Parallel to these polemics, Rancière has formed his own theory of biography as democracy. In his essay, "The Historian, Literature and the Genre of Biography," he argues that "[t]he division between two kinds of 'life' has to be overruled" (Rancière, 2011d, 174). This is the division between the active, glorious lives of the great and the passive, humdrum lives of the ordinary. To be on the former side of this divide is to be worthy of memory and biography; to live life on the latter side is to be consigned to oblivion. To overrule this divide, Rancière argues that we must rethink the traditional, Aristotelian idea of action that serves as the template for the biographic plot.

In doing so, Rancière takes his cues from modern literature. He argues that modern literature has flattened the classical hierarchy of representation, thus leaving all literary subjects equal. For instance, in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the provincial, banal characters of the story share space with detailed descriptions of equally banal, everday scenes and objects (Flaubert 2011). Irrespective of Flaubert's own political views, his novel's aesthetic is democratic in its effects.

Rancière pairs the democratic aesthetic of literature with an innovative account of action: "literarity." Samuel Chambers, first in an article and then in a book, has emphasized the centrality

of this idea to Rancière's political thought (Chambers 2005; 2013). In brief, it refers to the free circulation of words between human beings. In Rancière's view, we do not "possess" language. Instead, language is a medium through which we relate to each other, and words circulate in that medium. However, this circulation is typically policed: in any given social order, there are norms that delimit what may be said, who may speak, and who has access to certain forms of discourse. But this circulation is politicized in moments when such limitations are transgressed by disruptive speech. Thus, for Rancière, political action occurs when attempts to police the circulation of words fail; when those who have been deprived or debarred from access to words make their voices heard.

The significance of this concept of political action as "literarity" is that it makes no distinction between public and private or between different activities or ways of life. This is illustrated by Rancière's *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (2012a). In contrast to more standard historical accounts of the working class, such as E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), Rancière is not interested in workers' "class consciousness." Instead, he is interested in the literarity of individual workers. Of his subjects, Gabriel Gauny (1806-1889) is the best example. A joiner by trade, Gauny fashioned an ascetic way of life for himself that minimized his dependence on wages and maximized his free time to think, write, and wander the streets airing his thoughts. Gauny's story is a perfect example of what Rancière means by literarity: as a child, he would read from the scraps of text used as wrappings for the lentils that his mother would bring home from the market. Thus, by circulating in the most banal yet unlikely of ways – as packaging for a dietary staple – words fell into Gauny's hands.

With his "politics of literature" and his novel conception of political action as "literarity," Rancière levels the traditional hierarchy between the lives of the extraordinary and the ordinary. In addition, he makes it possible for us to see politics in places that we would not normally look, such as in the privacy of the workshop or the diary of a day-laborer, to cite examples from his *Proletarian Nights*. In this way, his conception of biography as democracy goes much farther than Arendt's, which is hamstrung by her distinctions between public and private as well as labor and action.

At this point, let us summarize the ways in which this study works with and against Arendt. This project was inspired by her conception of the biographic self: the idea that we become who we are through what we do, through our life story. Furthermore, I retain her emphasis on human finitude and non-sovereignty: we have little control over life's outcomes, and in particular political affairs. Politics is a process of interaction that shapes our identities but over which no one is in control. Given these parameters, thinking biographically gives us insight into the component pieces of political life – the actions of individuals – and consequently into the roots of our identity.

However, I differ with Arendt on the questions of humanity, methodology, and democracy. Through pairing Arendt with Agamben, I come to the conclusion that it is dangerous and false to tie humanity and identity together, and that it is better to treat them as two separate questions. Then, through engagement with Foucault, I suggest that we are better off leaving behind Arendt's "phenomenological humanism," with its thick description of the human condition, and adopting a discursive-analytic approach. This approach reveals that biographizing itself is a political act, especially when the lives of the marginalized, neglected, and misrecognized are recounted. Finally, I carry these lessons learned from Foucault over to an engagement with Jacques Rancière. Rancière points us to a discursive notion of political action and a democratized genre of biography.

Chapter Summary

This study is divided into four chapters. Each chapter is a treatment of a single author's work, beginning with Arendt and continuing with Agamben, Foucault, and finally Rancière. In each chapter, I juxtapose these author's theoretical writings with their biographic works, treating the latter not merely as illustrative examples but as contributions to theory in their own right. Across the span of these four chapters, I develop my core argument that action is the source of identity.

Chapter 1, "The Miracle of Life: Hannah Arendt and the 'Story-Form' of Human Being," focuses on an analysis of Arendt's idea of the "biographic self": that our life story is who we are. This may seem straightforward, even banal, but as Frederick M. Dolan observes, the biographic self is "uncanny," "uniquely ours but strangely unrecognizable to us, a self we can neither legitimately disavow nor fully acknowledge" (Dolan 1995, 330-331). This is because it is not something private but "[d]isclosed involuntarily through words and deeds uttered or performed in public" (ibid., 330). Who we are is what we do in the presence of others. The self is a public thing.

Perhaps the most provocative implication of this idea is that autobiography is, in some sense, a mistake, or as Adriana Caverero puts it, an "absurd exercise" (Cavarero 2000, 24). This is because one cannot be a witness to one's own acts, precede one's own birth or outlive one's own death. Action is a public phenomenon, a spectacle, that requires an audience. If actors could witness their own actions, there would be no need for a stage upon which they appear to others. But the fact is, we cannot get outside of ourselves, except perhaps vicariously through others' eyes. We are not capable of writing our own life story because we cannot have witnessed what we have done.

Furthermore, for Arendt, autobiography is absurd because life is not the product of design. Our life stories are the culmination of an unpredictable series of happenings that we go through. Because we know not what we do, we know not who we are. We do not choose who we are any more than we choose our fate. To attempt to "author" one's own life is futile at best, delusional at worst.

I illustrate these points through a reading of Arendt's biography of the German-Jewish salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), which recounts Varnhagen's intellectual journey from romanticism, which taught her to live her life as if it were a work of art, to her embrace of her Jewish identity, a biographical and historical fact from which she had long tried to escape. The moral of the story, if one can reduce it to that, is that life is not like art: it is not something that we are free to create as we see fit. It is not a product of our imagination. Instead, it is real, it is factual, and the things that we do – and that are done to us – have consequences that shape us into who we are.

In chapter 2, "To Be or To Be Able to Be: Giorgio Agamben on the Potentiality of Humanity," I present Agamben's challenge to Arendt's notion of the biographic self. According to Agamben, what makes us human is not what we do, but what we have the potential to do. This ultimately has the implication that the actions we take do not make us human or identify who we are.

The stakes of this challenge are made clear in Agamben's book, *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Based on the testimony of survivors of the Nazi death camps, in particular the memoirs of Primo Levi, it is an attempt to arrive at a "human understanding" of the Holocaust (Agamben 1999b, 11). In this attempt, Agamben focuses on a recurrent figure from survivor testimonials: *der Muselmann*. German for "Muslim," the *Muselmann* was a slang term used by inmates of the camps to describe

fellow inmates who through starvation, exhaustion, and brutalization had come to resemble "the living dead." The intensity of their suffering had rendered them unable to take action or even to speak.

From an Arendtian standpoint, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the *Muselmänner* had been dehumanized. For Arendt, a human is an acting and speaking being. Without these capacities, a human being loses their individuality and becomes a mere biological specimen. Without a biography, there is nothing to differentiate one human being from the next, and the individual disappears into the mass. However, Agamben argues that there is still something human about the *Muselmänner*. Regardless of the extreme degradation they have suffered, their human potentiality remains. Because potentiality exists beyond and apart from actuality, it cannot be destroyed by actual events. With this metaphysical claim, Agamben refutes dehumanization as such.

For reasons that I will detail later, I fail to find Agamben's metaphysics of potentiality – and in particular his attempt to reconceive practical life in such terms – convincing. However, Agamben makes a compelling case that it is a dangerous mistake to pin our humanity on our identity. It dehumanizes the anonymous, the unrecognized, and those who merely suffer the acts of others. This is a serious problem with Arendt's account of the biographic life, and I think the only solution is to separate the question of identity from the question of human nature. Instead, in the chapters that follow I will treat action and identity as artifacts of language rather than natural objects.

In chapter 3, "To Err Is Human: Biography vs. Biopolitics in Michel Foucault," I pursue this new line of thinking through engagement with Foucault's archaeological/genealogical method. This method challenges Arendt's "phenomenological humanism" with its claim that we

have no immediate, pre-conceptual experience of reality because we can only experience what we know.

To take up this challenge requires us to reconceive of action and identity in epistemological terms. We need to conceive of the formation of knowledge as a political act that in turn shapes identity. I believe that Foucault provides us with the necessary resources with his notion of "error." This notion, which he adapts from his mentor, Georges Canguilhem, posits that individuals develop forms of knowledge in order to adapt to their environment. In this model, what drives knowledge forward is not the internal logic of concepts themselves but the individual struggle to survive. While Canguilhem, a historian of science, conceives of "error" in biological terms, Foucault adapts the concept to apply it to social struggles. He uses it to highlight the political contest over what counts as knowledge and the categories by which an individual's identity is labeled.

To illustrate this concept of "error" at work, I turn to two dossiers that Foucault compiled during an extensive period of archival research in the 1970s: *I, Pierre Rivière* and *Herculine Barbin*. These dossiers provide us with very interesting examples of the genre of biography. Foucault juxtaposes the subjective, autobiographical documents of the titular subjects with objective, official documents written about these subjects by the legal and medical professionals who observed them. The point is not to provide a well-rounded and definitive portrait of these individuals, nor to vindicate either side, but rather to highlight the political struggle between individuals and institutions over identity. Foucault selects marginal individuals whose encounter with the authorities was prompted by their "abnormality." These authorities ascribed to these individuals an identity – "madman" in Rivière's case, just "man" in Barbin's – that these individuals rejected. Neither was willing to conform to the disciplinary demands of state power

and expert knowledge. Through their acts of self-identification, these individuals took up impossible identities that transgressed the limits of discursive practice within their historical worlds.

In chapter 4, "Life, Literarity, and Equality for All: Biography as Democracy in Jacques Rancière," I pursue this line of thinking further through engagement with the work of Rancière. My aim is to articulate a more robust and democratic conception of self-identification than we find in Foucault. Whereas Foucault is focused on the way institutions ascribe identities to individuals, Rancière emphasizes the other side of the story: how individuals act to give shape to their own lives.

The operative word in Rancière's thought, the idea that animates his work, is "equality." For him, politics is the demonstration of equality that disrupts the inequality of what he calls "police." This term refers generically to any given social hierarchy. What brings about politics is the equality of speaking beings that all police orders rest upon without being able to recognize it. For instance, it is only possible for superiors to give commands to inferiors if the so-called inferiors are perfectly capable of understanding what they say. Politics occurs when this relation of command is subverted and it becomes apparent that what is happening is a conversation between equals.

Hence, for Rancière, discourse is the matter and form of politics. He returns to Aristotle's definition of man as a political animal due to mankind's capacity for speech and modifies it thus: "Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words" (Rancière 2004c, 39). The power of words is their excess: we have more words than we know what to do with, and they circulate freely between us. "Literarity" refers to the fact that our relations are mediated by these freely circulating words, in

which thoughts, sentiments, and phrases flow. Politics occurs when this circulation cannot be controlled by the "police" and those who are not supposed to have access to words begin to speak up. When this happens, they prove their equality as speaking beings, thus compelling political debate.

I illustrate Rancière's idea of literarity as political action through a reading of his book, *Proletarian Nights*. Like Foucault's dossiers, it is based on extensive archival research, exhuming the lives of the obscure and forgotten, in this case members of the 19th-century French working class. Unlike Foucault, however, Rancière is not interested in how the dominant forces in society determine the life stories of the hapless individuals caught in their grip. He shows the opposite: the strategies that individuals of the oppressed classes devise to liberate themselves from domination and the philosophies of living that they put into practice. The common thread of these stories is literarity: these individuals were awoken by literature and politicized by writing and speaking.

Rancière's biographical work is political in two distinct yet interrelated ways. First of all, it compels us to think about action and identity differently. It allows us to see political action where we were not able to see it before, and thereby recover the identities of the previously obscure actors behind these acts. Second, biographies that capture these previously invisible instances of political identification do not only, in some sense, vindicate their subject. They also expand our democratic imagination. They train us to see politics where we would never have looked before, and they teach us to acknowledge those we tend to disregard or lump together as political agents with their own identities. This, in turn, has an effect on our own identity insofar as it causes us to rethink our relations with others. We come to see how our identity is shaped by a field of political

action more extensive than we had previously imagined. This is because who we are is not just what we do, taken in isolation, but the provisional product of our ongoing interactions with others.

Restatement

Acts of Identity is prompted by a puzzle: why do political theorists bother with biography? Above, I have given an outline of my answer: biography is a lens through which to view the link between identity and action. It affords us the insight that who we are is a consequence of what we do.

This insight challenges one of the primary values of our modern political life: autonomy. Liberalism, republicanism, and critical theory in its various strands have all either presupposed this capacity or posited it as a goal to be achieved. Against this modern ideal, I contend that we are not the sovereign masters of our own lives, let alone our political circumstances. Instead, I contend that our actions – and thus our identities – take shape in the unpredictability of interaction.

1 – The Miracle of Life: Hannah Arendt and the Story-Form of Human Being

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Hannah Arendt's notion of the "biographic self," or the idea that our life story is who we are. Although it will undergo modification as we proceed onto the subsequent chapters of this study, this notion is at the very core of what I wish to argue. Not only does action precede our identity, but it also determines it: these are the implications of Arendt's notion of the "biographic self," implications which belie the modern concept of the autonomous subject.

I begin by exploring what Arendt means when she speaks of a "specifically human" life (Arendt 1998, 97). As Adam Sitze observes, for her it is our "biographability" that makes us human (Sitze 2002, 112). Human beings are unlike other animals because each one of us is unique: we each have a unique life story that distinguishes us from the other members of our species. What makes our life stories unique is the fact that we have the freedom to act. We do not merely behave in accordance with our biological needs, but in addition we engage in unfettered creative acts. Thus, for Arendt, our humanity is tied to our "biographability," which is rooted in our ability to act.

From another angle, this is one more way of saying that human beings are political animals. We are human beings because we have the capacity to interact in a free and indeterminate manner. Our sociality is not dictated by our biology and we can have meaningful debates about how to live. But what is provocative about Arendt's account is that it also means that our identity is a public thing. If we become who we are through what we do, then our identity is not something "inside" us. It is something plain for all to see, and moreover, it is something "outside" of us that we cannot possess.

It is this uncanny and paradoxical aspect of our identity, and the difficulty of accepting it, that brings us to the second topic of this chapter: what I am calling "the autobiographic mistake." This is when one confuses one's "inner self" – one's thoughts and feelings – for one's "biographic self." This mistake leads to an "identity crisis:" since what one does is rarely a perfect reflection of what one intended to do, one has the urge to disavow one's acts and affirm one's inner purity. Arendt strongly criticizes this kind of romantic, introspective thinking, because it causes us to misrecognize who we really are and it causes us to misunderstand the nature of political action. It enthrones the self as sovereign and overlooks the fact that politics is an open-ended, interactive process.

In the section of this chapter on the autobiographic mistake, I make use of two examples. First, I examine the autobiographical writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom Arendt identifies as the "greatest example" of the autobiographic mistake (Arendt 1997, 91). In his *Confessions*, Rousseau is not actually interested in telling his life story so much as the "history of [his] soul" (Rousseau 1953, 262). His later autobiographical effort, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, is more successful in doing this precisely because it is a set of reveries with no duty to relate his life story. In this way, we can see how Rousseau's sense of self eventually dissolves into the vagaries of his dreams.

Then, I turn to Arendt's biography of the German-Jewish salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), which I read as an example of how to overcome Rousseau's autobiographic mistake. In her youth, Varnhagen felt ashamed of her Jewish heritage and sought to cultivate a novel identity for herself, inspired by Romantic writers such as Rousseau. However, in her maturity, she realized the futility of this gesture and came to embrace her heritage and accept her life story as who she was.

Thus far, one might form the impression that for Arendt, our "inner life" does not matter. However, this is not the case, and in the third section of this chapter I discuss the "thinking ego." For Arendt, the "thinking ego" is simply the "I" of "I think," the subject of thought. It is not "who" we are, but it is the necessary complement to the "biographic self" nonetheless. This is because our life story requires witnesses for it to be remembered. If there is no one to witness what we do, then there is no one to tell our story and reveal what it all means, and our identity never takes shape.

Furthermore, our freedom of action ultimately relies on our freedom of thought. While thought is no substitute for action, unthinking action is meaningless. Thus, for there to be a "who" behind the deed, actors themselves must be thoughtful. I emphasize this point in the fourth section of this chapter through a reading of Arendt's biographical collection, *Men in Dark Times*. I focus on three profiles from Arendt's book – Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) – that illustrate her notion that thought is not so much a retreat into one's self as an anticipation of dialogue with others and an engagement with the world.

The fifth section of this chapter, on totalitarianism, details what happens, in Arendt's account, when the "biographic self" and the "thinking ego" are threatened with annihilation. Totalitarianism, with its twin instruments of ideology and terror, crushes independent thinking and represses political action. Its goal is to reduce individual human beings to a common mass, thereby depriving humanity of its "biographability" and rendering it just another species, ruled by stimuli. This section shows why Arendt so passionately defends the "biographic self" and the "thinking ego:" they are not guaranteed, and in the "dark times" in which Arendt wrote, they were under threat.

In the sixth section, I turn to Arendt's biographic profile of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* because Eichmann is in many ways exemplary of the "totalitarian personality." Arendt's provocative assessment of him was that he was a "nobody," somebody incapable of thinking for himself or acting on his own, and thus whose monstrous deeds had a "banal" quality. The point is not that he was a "cog in the machine" – Arendt did not dissent when he was hanged – but that Eichmann was not so much a villain as he was a mediocre, empty shell of a human being. However, this is precisely the kind of human being that the inhumanity of totalitarianism requires.

However, as horrifying as the onset of totalitarianism was for Arendt, nonetheless she did not believe it would emerge victorious and become a permanent system of global government. This is due to the ontological condition of "natality," or the fact that each human being is born unique. The attempt to stamp out human individuality is futile because each newborn is a "miracle" that sets off a new and unpredictable chain of events, which becomes their life story. Thus, in the end, our human "biographability" will survive all attempts to suppress or eradicate it.

The Biographic Self

The "chief characteristic" of a "specifically human" life, according to Arendt, is that it is "full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography" (Arendt 1998, 97). This "biographability" (Sitze 2002, 112) distinguishes human life from other forms of life as well as life as such. Arendt articulates this distinction with the terms *zōē* and *bios*. *Zōē* is biological life, which pertains to all living things. It is metabolic, an endless cycle of production and consumption that reproduces itself. But *bios* – human life – is linear and finite because it is made up of a unique series of events that produces the outlines of a "plot" distinct from this metabolic

cycle.[1] From this "plot," it becomes possible to tell the story of a single human life (Arendt 1998, 96-97).

These two kinds of life, in turn, correspond to two kinds of activity, "labor" and "action."[2] Labor is the ceaseless process through which the material conditions of life are reproduced. This means eating, sleeping, procreating – the whole range of activities concerned with life's basic needs. Though human beings cannot afford to neglect these activities, nonetheless they do not differentiate human beings from animals or any other form of life, whether plants, bacteria, or fungi.

Action, on the other hand, is uniquely human because it rests on the condition of plurality. If all laboring activity is essentially "species" behavior that does not vary significantly from one member of the species to another, action is the result of the unpredictable social interactions of human beings. These interactions are unpredictable because they extend far beyond the realm of necessity – in which "labor" is mired – into the undetermined space of freedom. Here, human beings have a chance to distinguish themselves with the singular things they say and do. The

[1] This distinction is later taken up by Giorgio Agamben in his ongoing *Homo Sacer* project (see Agamben 1998), where it has attracted a number of critics (Dubreuil and Eagle 2006; Finlayson 2010). They question the etymology upon which the distinction rests, nothing that *zōē* and *bios*, in the original Greek, do not so neatly divide "human" life from any other kind of life as Arendt and Agamben insist. Nonetheless, for Arendt the distinction does not ultimately rest upon her borrowing from the Greeks so much as her very idiosyncratic phenomenology of human activity and specifically her distinction between "labor" and "action," which is discussed in the next paragraph.

[2] Arendt's personification of these activities in *The Human Condition* is revealing: "labor" becomes *animal laborans* whereas "action" becomes the "man of action." It is important to note, however, that these two characters, alongside *homo faber* (who corresponds to the activity of "work"), are personifications of the three *activities* of which the human condition is composed. They do not correspond to three types of "human being" since all three make up the human condition. For example, even if *animal laborans* suggests that "labor" is an animal activity, this does not mean that laborers are animals. Nonetheless it is certainly Arendt's intention to point out that "labor" is an activity that humans share with other animals and thus is not what makes us human.

course of action each takes gives their life a unique "story-form" that makes them a "who," not a "what."

"Who" we are, then, is our "biographic self." What makes each human being unique – a "who" – and not simply a biological specimen – a "what" – is that each has a singular biography. This may seem straightforward, even banal, but as Frederick M. Dolan writes, upon closer consideration the "biographic self" becomes an "uncanny self," "uniquely ours but strangely unrecognizable to us, a self we can neither legitimately disavow nor fully acknowledge" (Dolan 1995, 330-331). This is because the "biographic self" is not something personal and private, but "[d]isclosed involuntarily through words and deeds uttered or performed in public" (ibid., 330). "Who" we are is how we act in the presence of witnesses, regardless of how we personally conceive of ourselves or understand our motivations for acting. The "biographic self" defines "who" we are irrespective of how we see ourselves or who we want to be. It is a public, political self.

This is because "action" – the basis for the "biographic self" – is also the basis for politics. As Julia Kristeva puts it, action "links the destinies of *life*, *narrative*, and *politics*" (Kristeva 2001, 8). Biography and politics have a symbiotic relationship: just as action reveals "who" one is, such individuation amplifies the "plurality" of politics, and vice versa. Through our actions, we distinguish ourselves and make a name for ourselves, and we also make a contribution to public life.

Over time, this "symbiosis" weaves what Arendt calls "the web of human relationships" (Arendt 1998, 184). The action of one is always an interaction with others, and so the life stories of individuals always cross each other, stitching together a story bigger than themselves: history.

This is why Arendt calls biography "the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history" (ibid., 185).

This "web" is what makes the "biographic self" so "uncanny." While it is true that the life stories of individual human beings are the singular, self-spinning threads of the web's design, it is also true that each and every life story is entangled in its overall unfolding. For though individuals are free to act, "action almost never achieves its purpose" due to the "innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions" out of which history is woven (ibid., 184). What actually happens in history is rarely what anyone intended. But this means, in turn, that what happens in the biography of any given person is largely out of their hands. Hence, individuals cannot be considered the "authors" of their own life stories. As Arendt puts it, "Although everybody started his life story by inserting himself into the world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story" (ibid.). The "uncanny" effect of the "web of human relationships" is that one's self is determined, as it were, "outside" oneself, and by no "author" in particular – least of all one's own self.

In fact, Arendt declares, "The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was "made up" and the former was not made at all. The real story in which we are engaged as long as we live has no visible or invisible maker because it is not made" (ibid., 186). Biographies "are the inevitable results of action," and as such, seem to write themselves (ibid., 192).

It is not quite so simple, however. Even if life's course determines the form of a life story, it "reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants," insists Arendt (ibid.). Biographies do not write themselves because actions require witnesses, who are the only ones able

to grasp the full meaning of what has happened – and then only once the action is over. This means that "the essence of who somebody is" – the meaning of an individual's life – "can only come into being when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story" to be told (ibid., 194). Thus, paradoxically, we reveal "who" we are – our "biographic self" – only after we have disappeared. This is the ultimate "uncanniness" of Arendt's conception of the self: although we all must "live with ourselves," "who" we are and the meaning of our actions cannot be fully grasped until we are dead.

Nonetheless, such stories allow us to "live on" after our own death in the memory of others. Small comfort, perhaps, but according to Arendt, this was the true, original purpose of history: "to save human deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion" (Arendt 2006a, 41). Biographies preserve what we have done – what would otherwise disappear with our death. This preservation work saves our lives from such self-defeating futility and graces them with purpose and meaning. But this meaning is not only individual and biographical – it is also always already plural and political.

This is because biographies are composed of action, and as such are inescapably political. In fact, if it is through biographizing that we come to understand action, then, as Julia Kristeva suggests, "*[i]t is through narrative … that essentially political thought is realized*" (Kristeva 2001, 26-27). Political thought arises from biography because it preserves "action" as a thought-object.[3]

[3] There is much literature on Arendt's penchant for "storytelling" (Benhabib 1990; Curthoys 2002; Disch 1993; Herzog 2000; Kateb 2002; Luban 1983; Melaney 2006; Speight 2011; Wilkinson 2004; Young-Breuhl 1977), which often focuses on Arendt's account of totalitarianism (Arendt 1968b). There are even articles that point out Arendt's attempt to understand a historical phenomenon through the life story of an individual (Benhabib 1995; Herzog 2002; Leibovici 2007) as in her books on Rahel Varnhagen and the Eichmann trial. But with the exceptions of Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives* (Cavarero 2000) and Kristeva's book, there is very little focus on this one crucial point: that the life story *as such* is the essential object of political thought for Arendt. This is because the life story is the form that captures "action" and reveals what it means.

The point of biography, then, is not to understand our private selves but the political world. Hence, while the "biographic self" may be "uncanny" – a stranger to one's "inner self" – it is a "worldly" self, the product of the role the individual plays in history. It returns us from the "world-alienation" of our "inner self" to "who" we are on the stage of the historical world (Arendt 2006a, 53-54).

And history, for Arendt, is nothing but a "storybook" made up of biographies. It is composed out of the interconnected actions of individual human beings (Arendt 1998, 185). This is denied by the "modern concept of history," which portrays history as an encompassing whole, a process that follows its own logic in which individual lives are engulfed (Arendt 2006a, 41-90). Narratives of "development," "modernization," and "progress" all ultimately portray history this way. Hence, for Arendt, the recovery of our "biographic self" is crucial for preserving history as a scene of "action," and thus a free, political phenomenon rather than an inhuman, unstoppable force.

The Autobiographic Mistake

Work

The previous section began by opposing the human activity of "action" to the "labor" of life itself. This simple opposition between two kinds of activities with two corresponding forms of life is complicated, however, when the third activity of human beings is considered: "work." Work is "fabrication," the production of artificial, durable objects of use or adornment (Arendt 1998, 139). Everything that human beings build to last, from roads and buildings to books and furniture, is a product of "work." If so, isn't it strange to derive biography from "action," not work?

Arendt's explanation, simply put, is that "real stories" are not made (Arendt 1998, 139). Fictional stories are "works" precisely because they are "fabricated;" they are pure inventions. Whereas biographies, in a way, are composed by the very course of life – that is to say, by one's acts. So while biographies are certainly made to last, whether through oral or written tradition, they are in a sense merely the "impressions" or "traces" of real actions, fossilized in the form of a story.

Therefore, to live a human life is not a matter of "work" or "perfection." Biographies are not works that shape life into a human form. Rather, for Arendt, "action" gives human form to life, and biographies merely preserve this form in words. This is because "action," like Arendt's other phenomenological categories, is not a mere figure of speech but a basic phenomenon that structures the experience of human beings.[4] So biographic structure is not simply a genre convention: it corresponds to the fundamental structure of human being-in-the-world. If so, then to stray from the genre conventions of biography is not merely to take creative license, but to ignore the essential form of human being. It is to treat the form of human being as a fictional object.

This is why, for Arendt, autobiography is a mistake, an "absurd exercise" (Cavarero 2000, 24). It is the attempt to forge an identity through expressing one's "inner self" in a work of art. But this fabricated identity has no essential fidelity to what one has actually done in one's life. For Arendt, this deviation from real life results in a deformed understanding of human being and politics.

Rousseau

[4] On Arendt's "phenomenological humanism" and language, see Hinchman and Hinchman 1984.

In her book on Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt takes Jean-Jacques Rousseau – writer of both *Confessions* and *The Social Contract* – as the "greatest example" of the autobiographic mistake (Arendt 1997, 91). "By sentimentalizing memory," she writes, "he obliterated the contours of the remembered event" (ibid.). "What remained were the feelings experienced in the course of those events – in other words, once more nothing but reflections within the psyche," she concludes (ibid.). Thus, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau "related neither his life story nor his experiences," but merely "what he had felt, desired, wished, sensed in the course of his life" (ibid., 98). This means that, for Arendt, Rousseau's autobiography cannot be otherwise than a work of fiction, the pure product of his imagination. Rousseau treats his life as a *creatio ex nihilo*, a "work" that he himself made.

To get a sense of this, it is instructive to compare Rousseau's two main autobiographical works, the *Confessions* (Rousseau 1953) and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Rousseau 2004). The *Confessions* is a fraught text, torn between the duty to present the facts of his life and the desire to tell the "history of [his] soul" (Rousseau 1953, 262). Concerning the facts – or "the petty details," as he calls them – he recognizes that if the reader "finds the slightest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth" (ibid., 65). But Rousseau notes that his memory is unreliable and that he "may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates" (ibid., 262). So the truthfulness of his *Confessions* must rest on his conviction that he "cannot go wrong about what [he has] felt, or about what [his] feelings have led [him] to do," which are in fact "the chief objects of [his] story": "The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all the situations of my life" (ibid.).

The problem, then, is that Rousseau has difficulty expressing these feelings within the confines of a story. "But how can I tell what was neither said, nor done, nor even thought, but only relished and felt?" he asks (ibid., 215). Consider how he describes the happiest days of his life:

> I rose with the sun, and I was happy; I went for walks, and I was happy; I saw Mamma, and I was happy; I left her, and I was happy; I strolled through the woods and over the hills, I wandered in the valleys, I read, I lazed, I worked in the garden, I picked the fruit, I helped in the household, and happiness followed me everywhere (ibid.).

Indeed, "true happiness is quite indescribable" (ibid., 224). "It can only be felt," and the only way Rousseau can convey to his readers that he was happy is to repeat endlessly, "I was happy" (ibid., 224-225). Thus, Rousseau's intention – to communicate his feelings – is foiled by the very form of the life story as a sequence of events. Rousseau wishes to chronicle his sentiments, not his actions.

If so, then *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* is a much more successful enterprise than the *Confessions*. This is because it dispenses with plot entirely. It is a set of ten "walks," in which Rousseau meanders through the countryside, following the whims of his reflections. Because the "reverie" lacks structure, shape, and narrative, and makes no claim to factual truth, Rousseau is released from the obligations of his *Confessions* and is free to think and feel and remember as he pleases.

Of these reveries, the fourth – in which he muses over his *Confessions* – is especially interesting. What surprises him when he thinks about his own life in comparison with that text are "the number of things of my own invention which I remembered presenting as true;" and what surprises him even more is that "when [he] recalled these fabrications [he] felt no real repentance" (Rousseau 2004, 64). This discovery compels him to ponder the nature of truth. In the end, just

as in the *Confessions*, he declares that it is only the moral truth, "the voice of conscience" that really matters, and the inaccuracies in his *Confessions* are "not falsehood but fiction" (ibid., 68-69).

Rousseau's reveries are able to avoid this problem of "fiction" precisely because they do *not* attempt to tell Rousseau's life story. In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau is able to present what matters to him most – "the moral truth" – without needing to bother with factual matters. He is free to express his "inner self" without any need to fabricate or fictionalize his life story.

This inward turn has been influential, not only for autobiography, but for political thought as well. Rousseau's *Confessions* has been recognized as a "moral fable" for the modern age (Kelly 1987) with its "affirmation of intimate life," "authenticity," and "self-creation" (Ogrodnick 1999). Pairing this with his valorization of the instincts of pity and self-love in the Second Discourse (Rousseau 1997, 111-222) and his emphasis on the will in *The Social Contract* (Rousseau 1968), it can be seen that Rousseau's thought is consistently based in an inward-looking, sentimental cast of mind.

Arendt vilifies this kind of "sentimental" political thinking in *On Revolution* when she criticizes Rousseau alongside Robespierre for introducing "compassion" as a political principle, since it is not a guide for how one should act so much as how one ought to feel (Arendt 2006c, 66-72). Rousseau's sentimental turn, in both biography and politics, elevates feelings above actions and thus obfuscates both the proper "story-form" of human being and the actual, plural basis of politics. For him, life and politics are the products of self-creation, the expression of an authorial will.

Thus, with the extended example of Rousseau it becomes apparent why, for Arendt, autobiography amounts to a mistake, a deformation of not only biographic form but also political life. Rousseau's "sentimental" approach to life and politics treats them as creative works to be made according to an authorial will. The irony is that this ultimately results in their dissipation: biography vanishes into the vagaries of reverie; the political body becomes an incorporeal general will. What is lost in both cases is the sense of "action" as a public and communicable phenomenon. Life becomes an intimate and mysterious secret of the self, while the pluralistic association of political actors is made suspect and superfluous by the unanimity of a people bound by a general will.

Rahel Varnhagen

Arendt offers the story of Rahel Varnhagen as an example of how to overcome Rousseau's mistake. Late in life, Varnhagen renounced romanticism for the sake of historical reality and came to accept herself for who she was rather than who she had imagined herself to be. It is odd, however, that Arendt claims that what "interested [her] solely was to narrate the story of Rahel's life as she herself might have told it" (Arendt 1997, 81). This means that Arendt's critique of the "autobiographic mistake" is presented within a text that is itself pseudo-autobiographic. But there is a vast difference between Arendt's pseudo-autobiography – based on Varnhagen's late recognition of "who" she actually was – and the confusion of the "inner" with the "biographic" self.

When Arendt states her intention to narrate the life of Rahel Varnhagen as she herself might have done it, it is in accordance with Varnhagen's private judgment that she was an "extraordinary" individual (ibid.). Her reasons for thinking so had nothing to do with the fact that she was a "well-known salon hostess in Berlin during the height of the 'Goethe Cult,'" but rather because she bore

to the end of her life the burden of an overwhelming sense of "Destiny" (ibid.). Far from being a "man of action," she had "the courageous conviction of being herself the 'battlefield;' that being herself nothing but the scene of action, she in reality provided the essential connection between disparate events" (ibid., 144). In other words, she had a profound sense of the weight of history upon her life story. Her life story is that of one who spent their whole life suffering under this burden.

Rahel Varnhagen suffered from her position as a "Jew and pariah" in post-Enlightenment Germany (ibid., 258). It took her "sixty-three years to come to terms with [this] problem, which had its beginnings seventeen hundred years before her birth, which underwent a crucial upheaval during her life, and which one hundred years after her death – she died on March 7, 1833 – was slated to come to an end," Arendt writes (ibid., 85). Only on her deathbed was Varnhagen able to say, "The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life – having been born a Jewess – this I should on no account now wish to have missed" (ibid.). In this way, her whole life was a struggle with "destiny" – with her place in history.

The "great error" that Rahel Varnhagen made in the early years of this struggle was "[t]o live life as if it were a work of art, to believe that by "cultivation" one can make a work of art of one's own life," and thus escape Jewishness through the self-creation of a novel identity (ibid., 81-82). In a world that confronted her with obstacles due to her "infamous birth," the only place where she felt free was the realm of thought (ibid., 89). Through introspection, she discovered her "inner self" in isolation from the world. She began to conceive of her identity as a limitless entity because through introspection the self "is no longer molested by anything exterior" and "there is no longer any demand for action, the consequences of which necessarily impose limits even upon

the freest spirit" (ibid., 90-91). With such thoughts, she followed in the footsteps of Rousseau. "Facts mean nothing at all to me," she wrote in a letter signed "Confessions de J.J. Rahel" (ibid., 91).

In the end, Arendt writes, "Rahel's struggle against the facts, above all against the fact of having been born a Jew, very rapidly became a struggle against herself" (ibid., 92). Unable to deny the bare fact of her existence, she was compelled to fabricate it, to compose her life as a fiction. But in the struggle between one's "inner self" and the world, "the world always has the last word because one can introspect only into one's own self, but not out of it again" (ibid., 93). Introspection is no solution to one's struggle with the world, and no way to communicate one's story. "[H]ence," concludes Arendt, "there remained nothing for her but to 'tell the truth,' to bear witness, to gather in 'the splendid harvest of despair'" (ibid., 124-125). She had to accept that her life story was not the object of her choosing or the movement of her inner self, but the decree of fate.

The irony of Varnhagen's acceptance of her fate is that it made her see herself as an actor. "[S]he had learned that destiny not only operated upon one, but one vigorously took part in it," Arendt writes (ibid., 164). "What happened to her was not only a matter of being helplessly exposed to an event, of enduring sacrilege to the purity of self, the nobility of personality," she continues (ibid.). Varnhagen discovered that "she herself had acted no differently from other people," and through this discovery "she was forced into solidarity with the rest of the human race, who also do little else but err" (ibid.). Thus, when she came to accept her fate, she may have renounced authorship over her own life, but she did not become "passive." It was precisely the opposite: by giving up her will to self-creation, she discovered herself for "who" she was – an actor.

This discovery, however, leads us to another irony, and furthermore one that compels us to be strict in our definition of the "autobiographic mistake." For at the same time that Rahel Varnhagen discovered that she was an actor, she also realized that she already inevitably *had* a life story, despite all her protestations and earlier attempts to make one for herself. Through recognizing her actions, her life became an object to her – not an object of her own making, but a story that simply presented itself to her as the course of action that she had actually taken through life.

And "[w]ith this story, not with herself," Arendt insists, "she turned to the outer world once again" (ibid.). Through this newfound object, not a product of her own design but nonetheless the source of her identity, "[s]he wanted to fit herself into the world and into her own history" (ibid., 167). She discovered that in order to preserve "who" she was, she had to preserve what had happened. Only then, and despite who she might have wanted to be, would she find her place in history.

In this way – and only in this way – did Rahel Varnhagen succeed in becoming her own biographer. She told her story over and over to herself and to anyone who would listen. It was not her life as she wished it to be, but simply what had happened. Events made her "who" she was despite her romantic search for herself. Because she was a "Jew and pariah" and therefore "had no position in the world of men which guaranteed her permanence," she "had to tread the road to history, which was open to her only on the basis of her life-story, again and again" (ibid., 168, 258).

But she herself could never finish or "perfect" her biography, which ended only with her death. This is why Arendt had to finish it for her, one hundred years after her death; and why

Arendt endeavored to tell the story of Rahel Varnhagen "as she herself might have told it" (ibid., 81).

And as Arendt tells it – whether or not this is what Varnhagen had in mind – it is a story about overcoming the "autobiographic mistake" and recognizing one's true life story. The "autobiographic mistake" is to treat one's life as a work of art or the product of introspection, the movement of the "inner self." It is to confuse one's "inner self" for one's "biographic self." It is possible to be one's own biographer and to bear witness to one's own existence, but a biography is not the object of one's own making – it is the result of one's course of action through life. Therefore, an individual's autobiography is always provisional, as it is necessarily incomplete until the time of their death. Their story can only be finished as a biography written by somebody else.

The Thinking Ego

Arendt's unsympathetic critique of the "autobiographic mistake" – to confuse one's "inner self" for one's "biographic self" – is not intended to brush aside the "inner life" of human beings. For if "who" we are is how we appear to others – our "biographic self" – then we can never be who we are without the presence of spectators to witness and preserve our actions in their memory. Therefore, for us to be who we are, we require a witness who is alive on the inside – a "thinking ego."

However, this "thinking ego" must not be confused for the "biographic self." As Jerome Kohn puts it, for Arendt "the split between thinking and acting is radical and complete" (Kohn 1990, 124). Thinking is a purely mental phenomenon, an activity that is invisible to the world. Action, on the other hand, is a purely worldly phenomenon: its existence is only in its appearance. The separate nature of these two activities gives rise to a dissociative split in the identity of an

individual, captured in a paradoxical saying by the poet Valéry that Arendt quotes in *The Life of the Mind*: "*Tantôt je pense et tantôt je suis*" ["at times I think and at times I am"] (Arendt 1978, 197).

If one's "biographic self" is "who" one actually is, the "I" that thinks is something else entirely, something far more enigmatic and elusive: the self-consciousness of the thinking activity itself. This is something so enigmatic and elusive, in fact, that Arendt identifies it with Immanuel Kant's infamous postulate, the mysterious "thing in itself:" "it does not appear to others and, unlike the self of self-awareness, it does not appear to itself, and yet it is 'not nothing'" (Arendt 1978, 42-43). The thinking ego is something real, but it never appears although it lies behind all that appears. For in order to reify any appearance as an "object" – in order to apprehend reality – we must think.

In addition to the fact that it never appears, the "thinking ego" is mysterious because it is identical to the "sheer activity" of thinking itself (ibid., 43). And thinking itself is "ageless, sexless, without qualities, and without a life story" (ibid.). Therefore, "the thinking ego is not the self" (ibid.).

Arendt illustrates the difference between the two through a parable by Franz Kafka. It tells the story of a man, called "He," who must fight a battle on two fronts, both behind him and before him. The forces that antagonize him, according to Arendt's interpretation, are the past and the future. "He" stands in the present "now" – a "gap" in time "between past and future" (ibid., 202-203).

Kafka's "He" represents the "thinking ego," because only thinking makes time stand still. "Only insofar as he thinks," Arendt writes, "and that is insofar as he is ageless – a 'he' as Kafka so rightly calls him, and not a 'somebody' – does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in this gap of time in between past and future" (Arendt 2006a, 12). "Applied to historical or

biographical time," she continues, "none of these metaphors can possibly make sense because gaps in time do not occur there" (ibid.). There are no gaps in the ceaseless succession of worldly events. "The gap between past and future opens only in reflection, whose subject matter is what is absent" to the senses – either memories of the past or anticipations of what the future holds (Arendt 1978, 206). In other words, it is only by dwelling on what is *not* before our eyes that we come to perceive the "past" and "future" as times distinct from the present moment – the *nunc stans* – in which we think.

"The specific difficulty" with this parable, Arendt insists, "is that the reader must be aware that the thinking ego is not the self as it appears and moves in the world, remembering its own biographical past, as though 'he' were *à la recherche du temps perdu* or planning his future" (ibid.). Unlike the "thinking ego," the "biographic self" is totally immersed in the seamless flow of worldly happenings. It cannot absent itself from time's passage; it *is* its appearance in time. Even the two fundamental events of one's biography – birth and death – occur *in media res*. Only the "thinking ego" may absent itself from the world of appearances and interrupt the endless march of time.

Without this interruption, the "biographic self" would never truly take shape. Without the "thinking ego," the words and deeds of human beings would vanish in the flux of phenomena, no more enduring or meaningful than waves crashing on the sea or clouds passing overhead. "Without 'him'" – the "thinking ego" – Arendt writes, "there would be no difference between past and future, but only everlasting change" (ibid., 208). "[W]e find our place in time when we think," she argues, "when we are sufficiently removed from past and future to be relied on to find out their meaning, to assume the position of 'umpire,' of arbiter and judge over the manifold, neverending affairs of human existence in the world, never arriving at a final solution to their riddles but ready with ever-

new answers to the question of what it may be all about" (ibid., 209-210). In short, it is only when we stop and think that we can grapple with the *meaning* of all the things that have been said and done.

It is through this quest for meaning that the "biographic self" takes form as a story. Stories are "thought-objects" that gather the disarray of the past into a coherent whole. When represented this way, it is revealed what the past, taken as a whole, meant. This is how the act of thinking not only preserves the words and deeds of individual human beings, but also allows us to understand them.

However, it is important to emphasize – as Jean Yarbrough and Peter Stern do (Yarbrough and Stern 1981, 331) – that for Arendt "meaning" is not the same thing as "truth." "Truth," according to Arendt, is the criterion of cognition, and is concerned with the correct apprehension of perceptions. "Meaning," on the other hand, is the criterion of thinking proper, which "does not ask what something is or whether it exists at all – its existence is always taken for granted – *but what it means for it to be*" (Arendt 1978, 57). Unlike cognition, thought is not concerned with the bare facts of the matter, but with interpreting them in order to understand *why* things are as they are.

Hence, it is not enough for witnesses simply to have *seen* what happened, no matter how accurately. In addition to this, they must think about what they have seen in order for there to be meaning. Without this extra effort, accounts of what has happened, no matter how "truthful," will not be able to be understood. In terms of biography this means the difference between a bare account of what somebody has done with their life, and a story that reveals "who" this person truly was.

In this way, the "thinking ego" is the necessary complement to the "biographic self." "Who" we are is not merely what we have said and done, but the meaning of these acts revealed in thought. Without the "thinking ego," the "biographic self" would be as ephemeral as its actions. Not only that, but it would also be empty, offering no insight into the doer – the "who" – behind the deed.

Still, the "thinking ego" is not part of "who" we are. According to Arendt, the "I" that thinks is merely the self-consciousness of the thinking activity itself. It is an uncanny entity inside us that from time to time makes its presence felt. And this "presence" is mystifying: the "thinking ego" is invisible, anonymous, and faceless, without an origin and without an explanation as to why it exists. So even if Arendt cannot dismiss the importance of our "inner life" for the realization of the "biographic self" – or the importance of "the life of the mind," at least – it is not "who" we are.

Men in Dark Times

Arendt's insistence that the "thinking ego" is not part of "who" we are – our "biographic self" – does not mean that thinking is superfluous to living a fully human life. To the contrary, in her opinion a life without thinking "is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive" (ibid., 191). Likewise, her insistence that thinking and acting are entirely separate activities does not mean that thinking does not have an effect on how we act – and thus an indirect role in shaping "who" we are. Though "indeed in our world there is no clearer or more radical opposition than that between thinking and doing," she submits that "the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind" (ibid., 71). Without thought, human acts would lack meaning as well as character – which leaves us with no "who" behind the deed.

Furthermore, the freedom to act, while distinct, is not independent from the freedom to think. The singularity of an individual's actions is essentially tied to the singularity of their thoughts, insofar as it is from these thoughts that the individual forms their plans for action. Indeed, the freedom of thought is no doubt greater and even more dizzying than our freedom to act. As Arendt writes in her book on Rahel Varnhagen, "[i]n the isolation achieved by introspection thinking becomes limitless because it is no longer molested by anything exterior; because there is no longer any demand for action, the consequences of which necessarily impose limits even upon the freest spirit" (Arendt 1997, 90-91). However, as we have already seen, such freedom on its own lacks reality, and requires translation into action if it is to manifest itself in the world.

Hence, when there is little freedom to act, the only freedom left – freedom of thought – barely shows itself. This is the situation human beings find themselves in during what Arendt calls "dark times." Such times, according to Arendt, "are no rarity in history;" they cover any period in which the "light" of the public has gone out and individuals retreat into themselves (Arendt 1968a, ix).

Arendt believed she herself lived in "dark times" – not because of "the monstrosities of [the twentieth] century which indeed [were] of a horrible novelty," but because Martin Heidegger's "sarcastic, perverse-sounding statement, *Das Licht der Öffentlichkeit verdunkelt alles* ('The light of the public obscures everything') went to the very heart of the matter and actually was no more than the most succinct summing-up of existing conditions" (ibid.). During her lifetime, propaganda, ideology, and the notion of politics as the revolutionary "movement" of party organizations swept pluralities off the public stage and abandoned individuals to their private selves.

Arendt's *Men in Dark Times*, a collection of biographical profiles, attempts to illuminate the "dark times" in which she lived by recounting the lives of individuals who continued to think for themselves in the face of it all: censorship, propaganda, ideology, conformism, and terror. What Arendt finds exemplary about these figures is their vital, worldly engagement in the activity of thinking, an attitude which to her is more valuable in "dark times" than theoretical brilliance. For her, as David Luban observes, "[u]nder certain historical circumstances, those she refers to as 'dark times,' even the most ingenious and plausible theories lose their role in human knowledge" (Luban 1983, 216). "Yet," he points out, "the role of theories can be assumed, imperfectly to be sure, by 'ever-recurrent narration,' frequently the narration of stories of individual human beings" (ibid.).[5]

That is to say, Arendt believes that the stories of the lives she profiles have something to teach, regardless of whether the thinkers she considers were right or wrong in a theoretical sense. Perhaps all they teach is the necessity to think for oneself. But in "dark times," this may be the only freedom left, and the only spark that may reignite the "light" of the public and inspire new action.

In what follows, I consider three of Arendt's profiles. The first of these, of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, establishes Arendt's paradigm of the "independent thinker." The second, of Rosa Luxemburg, is an example of an independent thinker who went unheard in an age of ideology.

[5] Or as Arendt puts it herself: "That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was them on earth – this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn" (Arendt 1968a, ix).

And the last, of Bertolt Brecht, is an example of an independent thinker who surrendered to ideology.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), one of the most outstanding figures of the Enlightenment, is the only figure in *Men in Dark Times* that did not live during the first half of the twentieth century. Yet Arendt feels free to treat him "as though he were a contemporary" (Arendt 1968a, vii). This is perhaps because, like the others in her collection, "Lessing never made his peace with the world in which he lived" (ibid., 6). He took pleasure in "challenging prejudices" and "telling the truth to the court minions," even as he faced the wrath of the government censors (ibid.).

This pleasure, Arendt writes, sprang "from a passionate openness to the world and love of it" (ibid.). Such openness to the world made it possible for Lessing to adopt many different perspectives on it, and impossible for him to ever come to a fixed one. Arendt believes that "[w]e very much need Lessing to teach us this state of mind," since "[t]he nineteenth century's obsession with history and commitment to ideology still looms so large in the political thinking of our times that we are inclined to regard entirely free thinking […] as having no authority over us" (ibid., 8). To him, thinking was a mode of freedom, and he resisted submission to all proofs and coercive logics.

However, for Lessing this freedom was rooted in the possibility of communication, rather than the freedom of the individual "thinking ego" isolated from the constraints of the real world. "Thus," Arendt submits, "Lessing's famous *Selbstdenken* – independent thinking for oneself – is by no means an activity pertaining to a closed, integrated, organically grown and cultivated individual" but rather to one who anticipates an open dialogue with others (ibid., 8). "For Lessing,"

she writes, "thought does not arise out of the individual and is not the manifestation of a self" because he believes the "thinking ego" is always open to the perspectives of different people (ibid., 9).

This freedom of thought in a simulated dialogue is bound to atrophy in times when real dialogue is not possible, however, and Arendt suggests that "Lessing probably never believed that acting can be replaced by thinking, or that freedom of thought can be a substitute for the freedom inherent in action" (ibid.). But "[w]hen men are deprived of the public space," she writes, there is nothing else to do but to "retreat into their freedom of thought" and await the day of its return (ibid.). She believes that Lessing himself, though a man of the Enlightenment, was awaiting such a day.

Arendt illustrates Lessing's position through comparison with one of his contemporaries whom we have already encountered: Rousseau. She argues that the natural inclination of a person born in "dark times" would be to think like Rousseau: to desire to "reach behind" the world "in order to arrive at mutual understanding with their fellow men without regard for the world that lies between them" (ibid., 11-12). This is what Rousseau was attempting, she argues, when he claimed that compassion was the truest manifestation of human nature. Now "Lessing also declared that the best person is the most compassionate," but unlike Rousseau, he was disturbed by the fact that "we feel 'something akin to compassion' for the evildoer also" (ibid., 12). Hence, instead of compassion, Lessing chose friendship as that "in which alone true humanity can prove itself" (ibid.).

"The decisive factor" that made Lessing favor friendship over compassion, Arendt writes, is that compassion, "like everything instinctual, tend[s] to muteness … and certainly not dialogue" (ibid., 16). Compassion is an invisible, passive emotional state that leads neither to speech nor to

action. Meanwhile "the essence of friendship," as Lessing understood it in the Greek sense, "consist[s] in discourse" (ibid., 24). Arendt insists that this practice of discourse is how human beings "humanize" the world they live in: "[w]e humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human" (ibid., 25). To her mind, and to Lessing's, our emotional life in itself is not-quite-human: "However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows," she writes (ibid., 24-25).

Lessing's commitment to discourse led him to what were indeed "highly unorthodox opinions about truth" (ibid., 26). He did not only reach the "theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world" due to the infinite number of possible perspectives, he was also glad about the fact because it meant that "the unending discourse among men will never cease so long as there are men at all" (ibid., 27). His gladness attests to the basic fact that he valued acting – saying and doing – above thinking, and that thinking for him was only an anticipation of dialogue with other human beings, each of whom sees "truth" from their own point of view.

In sum, Lessing is an exemplary thinker for Arendt because he "was a completely political person;" "he insisted that truth can exist only where it is humanized by discourse" (ibid., 30). His model of thinking anticipates dialogue and rejects solipsism. Thus, for him, the "thinking ego" does not reflect one's "self:" the "I" that thinks is always at least "two-in-one" (Arendt 1978, 180-193).

Rosa Luxemburg

Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) is an example of someone who thought like Lessing in a time when "thinking" was typically equated with doctrinaire adherence to the logic of an ideology. A "rather marginal figure" in the German socialist movement who "was not an orthodox Marxist, so little orthodox indeed that it might be doubted that she was a Marxist at all," Luxemburg, alongside her associate Karl Liebknecht, was murdered and dumped in the Landwehr Canal in Berlin by right-wing paramilitary forces after the failure of the German Revolution of 1918-1919 (ibid., 34, 38). Arendt tells Luxemburg's story because it captures the problem of ideology: ideologists' obsession with correct "doctrine" pushes critical thinkers to the margins and impedes political action. She asks: "Can it be that the failure of all her efforts as far as official recognition is concerned is somehow connected with the dismal failure of revolution in our century?" (ibid., 34).

"What mattered most in [Luxemburg's] view," according to Arendt, "was reality in all its wonderful and all its frightful aspects, even more than revolution itself" (ibid., 39). This is not to say that Luxemburg was not a revolutionary – "revolution was as close and real to her as to Lenin," according to J.P. Nettl, her biographer – but that for her revolution was not an "article of faith" more dear to her than the world she lived in (ibid., 38). Thus, her Marxism was the result of her judgment that Marx was simply "the best interpreter of reality of them all," and no more (ibid., 39).

Her book, *The Accumulation of Capital*, is perhaps the best example of her "unorthodox" thought. Since capitalism had not yet collapsed "under the weight of its economic contradictions" as Marx had predicted, Luxemburg became convinced that some "outside cause" had prevented it (ibid.). This outside cause, she came to argue, was the ongoing absorption of "pre-capitalist sectors" both within and outside the boundaries of the capitalist countries (ibid.). This meant that

expropriation was not capitalism's "original sin" but recurring, fueled by the colonization of the globe.

"Lenin," Arendt writes, "was quick to see that this description, whatever its merits or flaws, was essentially non-Marxist" because it "contradicted the very foundations of Marxian and Hegelian dialectics, which hold that every thesis must create its own anti-thesis […] so that the movement of the whole process remains bound to the initial factor that caused it" (ibid., 40). Therefore, in his judgment, Luxemburg had made a "fundamental error," despite the fact that "what was an error in abstract Marxian theory was an eminently faithful description of things as they really were" (ibid.). The problem for Marxists was that Luxemburg valued ideology less than reality.

The other, perhaps more important, point on which she differed with the "orthodoxy" was on the question of revolution. She learned from the first Russian revolution, in 1905 after the Russo-Japanese War, "that 'good organization does not precede action but is the product of it,'" that "revolutions are 'made' by nobody but break out 'spontaneously,' and that 'the pressure for action' always come 'from below'" (ibid., 52). None of these lessons were heeded by the major socialist party organizations, and indeed they would have been undermined by them. Instead, revolutionary organizers like Lenin learned from the experience that all that was needed was "a small, tightly organized group with a leader who knew what he wanted," and that "wars were welcome" (ibid., 53). Luxemburg strongly disagreed, "[f]or she refused categorically, from beginning to end, to see in war anything but the most terrible disaster," and "she did not believe in a victory in which the people at large had no part and no voice," Arendt writes (ibid.). In fact, "'the major difference between her' and the Bolsheviks," as Arendt quotes from J.P. Nettl's

biography, was that "she 'was far more afraid of a deformed revolution than an unsuccessful one'" (ibid.).

"And haven't events proved her right?" Arendt asks (ibid.). "Isn't the history of the Soviet Union one long demonstration of the frightful dangers of 'deformed revolutions?'" (ibid.). This is the tragedy of Rosa Luxemburg's story, under which lies a more basic difficulty: no matter whether she was right or wrong, as long as she was "unorthodox," her thinking was judged to be fundamentally flawed. There is precious little room to think – let alone be right – when ideology reigns.

Bertolt Brecht

Unlike Rosa Luxemburg, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) did not die a violent death, but perhaps he died a sadder one. For, as Arendt writes, "[t]he worst that can happen to a poet is that he should cease to be a poet, and that is what happened to Brecht in the last years of his life" (ibid., 213). She is referring to his time spent in East Berlin after being ejected from the US and West Germany, where he wrote and published "his ode to Stalin and his praise of Stalin's crimes" (ibid., 210). His poetry of these years, in Arendt's estimation, was "weak and thin" – if not outright awful like the above-mentioned works – with only a few minor exceptions (ibid., 213). Arendt takes Brecht's sudden loss of talent as a sign of his divine "punishment" for having misused his gifts: for "although in general Goethe was right and more is permitted to poets than to ordinary mortals, poets, too, can sin so gravely that they must bear their full load of guilt and responsibility" (ibid., 218).

Thus, "side by side with the great poet and playwright there is also the case of Bertolt Brecht" – "a kind of case history of the uncertain relationship between poetry and politics" (ibid., 209, 218). To recount his story, "[w]e don't need to go into Brecht's personal life," Arendt insists,

"about which he was more reticent – less willing to speak – than any other twentieth century author" (ibid., 218). But there is one important thing to note: "Brecht, born in 1898, belonged to what one might call the first of the three lost generations" (ibid.). He, and the other men of his generation who came of age during World War I and for whom the return to "normality" after the war felt like "a betrayal of all the experience of horror, and comradeship in the midst of horror, that had made them into men," "preferred to be lost – lost to themselves as well as to the world" (ibid.).

"What set him apart" from his peers, however, Arendt points out, "was that he realized how deadly ridiculous it would be to measure the flood of events with the yardstick of individual aspirations" (ibid., 226). Instead, "gifted with a penetrating, non-theoretical, non-contemplative intelligence that went to the heart of the matter," he saw a "world swept clean and fresh" where "[n]othing seemed left but the purity of the elements, the simplicity of sky and earth, of man and animals, of life itself" (ibid., 229). While cultural pessimists indulged their fascination with decay, Brecht became a merry sort of nihilist, at home in a world where nothing was left and in love with life.

However, "[w]hat brought Brecht back to reality, and almost killed his poetry," Arendt writes, "was compassion" (ibid., 235). His joy in a world swept clean was weighed down by the realities of the Weimar Republic: catastrophic economic instability, unemployment, and teeming misery. When "we add these things up," as Arendt suggests – "the weightlessness and the yearning" for relevance "plus compassion, the almost natural, or as Brecht would have said, animal-like, inability to bear the sight of other people's suffering – his decision to align himself with the Communist Party is easy to understand, under the circumstances of the time" (ibid., 239).

Less easy to understand, however, is how he retained his "doctrinaire and often ludicrous adherence to the Communist ideology" after the Moscow trials – "in which his friends were among the defendants" – or during the Spanish Civil War – "when he must have known that the Russians did everything they could to the detriment of the Spanish Republic" – or when the Hitler-Stalin pact was agreed upon, or finally, and above all, "after he had settled down in East Berlin, where he could see, day after day, what it meant to the people to live under a Communist regime" (ibid., 215-216). Especially for someone of Brecht's "extraordinary intelligence," this was a grave sin (ibid., 247). And his punishment for not daring to think – or for thinking one thing and then writing another when it would have been better to write nothing at all – Arendt judges, was the loss of his voice.

This loss of voice – which ultimately amounts to a loss of one's self, in Arendt's terms – illustrates in dire terms the importance of thinking even when there is no freedom to act. Though the "thinking ego" is not "who" we are, if our thinking goes silent, then our ability to act, too, is in danger. Thought imbues our words and deeds with principle and character. Therefore, if we do not dare to think in "dark times," we – like Bertolt Brecht – stand the risk of losing "who" we are.

Totalitarianism

In the darkest of all times – the years under "totalitarianism" in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia – this risk of losing "who" we are – and thus our humanity – was on the brink of realization. Total domination requires that human beings can no longer act or even think for themselves. Because action is unpredictable, it must be replaced by predictable behavior; because thought leads to new insights, it must be harnessed to the iron logic of an ideology. Overall, the task, as Dana Villa describes it, is the "replacement of a plural and active humanity with the interchangeable

examples of the 'animal species mankind'" (Villa 2007, 33). Totalitarianism attempts to annihilate "who" we are – our biographic selves – in order to totally dominate "what" we are – an animal species.

Totalitarianism achieves its aim of dehumanization through twin instruments: ideology and terror. The latter, according to Arendt, "is the essence of totalitarian domination," just as "lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny" (Arendt 1968b, 464). This essence is obviously opposed to that of non-tyrannical governments, since "[g]uilt and innocence become senseless notions" under terrorism (ibid., 465). However, the terrorism of totalitarianism is also distinct from the lawlessness of tyranny. If the source of tyrannical lawlessness is the arbitrary and selfish will of the tyrant, which makes the consequences of any action unpredictable and thereby spreads fear amongst the tyrant's subjects, terror has nothing to do with human interests of any kind. The source of its "law" is "suprahuman:" "History" in the case of Stalinism; "Nature" in the case of Nazism (ibid.). "Terror," Arendt writes, "is the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action" (ibid.).

The purpose of totalitarian terror, then, is to eliminate the human capacity for action. Initially, it takes the familiar step of tyrants: abolishing lawfulness and destroying the liberties of citizens. But it goes further: while tyrannies merely turn the public realm into a "desert," the "iron band" of totalitarian terror will tolerate no space for its citizens to move, not even a "desert" (ibid., 466). "It substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions," Arendt writes (ibid., 465-466). While tyrannies use fear

to discourage citizens from acting, totalitarianism eliminates the space necessary for action to take place.

In doing so, Arendt notes, totalitarianism appears to solve "a very old problem of political thought:" the distinction between the "essence" of a government and its motive force (ibid., 466). This problem arises because the essence of government is lawfulness, which "sets limitations to actions, but does not inspire them" (ibid., 467). Therefore, in addition to their "essence," governments require what Montesquieu called a "principle of action" to guide their citizens (ibid.). Examples of such principles are "honor in a monarchy" and "virtue in a republic" (ibid.). In fact, even tyrannies rely upon their own "principle of action" – fear – to guide the conduct of subjects. But "[n]o guiding principle of behavior, taken itself from the realm of human action, such as virtue, honor, fear, is necessary or can be useful to set into motion a body politic which no longer uses terror as a means of intimidation, but whose essence *is* terror," writes Arendt (ibid., 468). Terror itself, "as the execution of a law of movement," renders "principles of action" superfluous (ibid., 465).

Instead of a "principle of action," then, totalitarianism guides its subjects through ideology, which indoctrinates them concerning the nature of the "law of movement" that terror supposedly obeys. "An ideology," Arendt states, "is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea" (ibid., 468). It is an ism "which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence deducing it from a single premise" (ibid., 467). For instance, the idea of race, when it is used to explain human nature and history, develops into the ideology of racism. As Arendt says, "Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction" (ibid., 470). Ideology,

then, divorces thinking from reality, and chains it to a logical process that unfolds from a single premise.

Thus, while the purpose of terror is to eliminate action, ideology's purpose is to enslave thought. This enslavement is not the result of the irresistible power of any idea in and of itself, Arendt says, but from the compulsive force of logic: "The tyranny of logicality begins with the mind's submission to logic as a never-ending process," she writes (ibid., 473). Once an individual has submitted to the basic premise of an ideology, their thoughts are no longer free and they are compelled to accept the "necessary" conclusions that are deduced from the strict unfolding of its logic.

Arendt demonstrates the power of this "tyranny of logicality" with the example of the Bolshevik purge, infamous for "making its victims confess to crimes they never committed" (ibid.). These confessions were extracted through the ruthless application of an ideological premise: in this case, the Marxist premise that history is the history of class struggles. Now, since the Party is the vanguard of the class struggle and therefore the vanguard of history, whatever the Party says must be historically correct. But what the Party says is that the crime of which it accuses you was a historically necessary development, as is the punishment of the crime by the Party. Without punishment of these crimes, history cannot be advanced and the Party is threatened. So either you admit to the crimes of which the Party accuses you, and by submitting to punishment you help the Party; or you deny guilt, which hurts the Party and makes you its enemy. The "coercive force of the argument" for those Party members who were to be purged, according to Arendt, "is: if you refuse, you contradict yourself, and, through this contradiction, render your whole life meaningless" (ibid.). This is how ideology forces one's mind to accept the "logic" of terror.

The cumulative effect of terror and ideology is the creation of the condition of "loneliness," which according to Arendt is distinct from and far more desperate than the condition of "isolation." "Isolation" – "a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me" – is characteristic of "dark times" in general, and in particular the condition created under tyranny (ibid., 474). "Loneliness," on the other hand, is when "I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship" – including one's own self as one's own partner in thinking (ibid.). This is why totalitarianism produces the darkest of all "dark times:" even one's own "inner life" goes dark.

"What makes loneliness so unbearable," according to Arendt, "is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals" (ibid., 477). Like solitude, loneliness prevents one's identity from being "confirmed" and fully realized as a "biographic self" through the recognition of one's political peers. But what makes loneliness far more extreme than solitude is that it extinguishes even the vague sense of self we can attain in thought in partnership with the "thinking ego," the "I" that thinks. In loneliness, both the "biographic self" and the "thinking ego" vanish like they were nothing.

Thus, as Jerome Kohn writes, "[t]o grasp the evil of totalitarian criminality requires a mental perspective in which the experience of being superfluous – the loneliness of not belonging to the world, the sense of the futility of living – is reflected" (Kohn 2002, 640). The totalitarian obsession with the endless processes of natural or historical development leads to a total disregard for the life span of the individual and thus the utter devaluation of individual worth and dignity. Biographizing – revealing and remembering the unique identity of an individual – becomes a futile task.

According to Arendt, the central institution of the totalitarian "experiment" – the attempt to render "human beings superfluous *as human beings*," that is, as individuals with a life story apart from nature or history – is the concentration camp (Villa 2007, 6). It is in these "holes of oblivion," where "[t]he dead are immediately forgotten 'as if they had never existed,' their deaths as superfluous as their lives had been," that the destruction of the human individual is realized (Kohn 2002, 640). "In the camps," writes Kohn, "human beings were made into one utterly predictable 'living corpse,' a body permanently in 'the process of dying.' Men and women," he continues, "were reduced 'to the lowest common denominator of organic life,' rendered 'equal' in the sense of being *interchangeable*, an inhuman 'equality'" with no respect for the person (ibid., 638).

This insane "experiment," according to Arendt, was carried out methodically in three steps.[6] The first "is to kill the juridical person in man" (Arendt 1968b, 447). This requires a number of measures: "putting certain categories of people outside the protection of the law;" "placing the concentration camp outside the normal penal system;" and "selecting its inmates outside the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty" (ibid.). But it is this last measure – "the arbitrary selection of victims" – that is "the essential principle of the institution," since terror disregards juridical notions of innocence or guilt (ibid., 450).

"The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses," Arendt writes, "is the murder of the moral person in man" (ibid., 451). Demoralization requires that making a choice amounts to complicity, and that protesting amounts to nothing at all. Regarding the former, Arendt gives an example: "Who could solve the moral dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the

[6] For a book-length examination of this methodical process of dehumanization, see Aharony 2015.

Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed?" (ibid., 452). As for the latter, it is assured "in the main by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible" (ibid., 451). Martyrdom is impossible because every human life in the camps is consigned to oblivion. There will be no one to remember what was done and thus any act of protest will prove meaningless and futile.

Finally, "[o]nce the moral person has been killed, the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses is the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity" (ibid., 453). More than blotting out the "biographic self," this requires stamping out the smoldering embers from which "action" may once more be sparked: from the activity of thinking. "Through systematic terror in a 'controlled' environment," the camp eliminates the capacity of its inmates to even think, turning "humans into 'bundles of reflexes' much like Pavlov's dogs" (Villa 2007, 6, 33).

In sum, this glimpse into the darkest of all "dark times" – the years of totalitarian rule in the middle of the twentieth century – illustrates powerfully Arendt's conviction that what makes life "specifically human" is its "biographability" (Arendt 1998, 97; Sitze 2002, 112). Unfortunately, it also illustrates powerfully how fragile a "specifically human" form of life can be.

Eichmann

It is important to remember, however, that totalitarianism dehumanizes its perpetrators as well as its victims, even if the former are spared from being tortured, brutalized, and destroyed. To be effective, terror, the "essence" of totalitarianism, must completely permeate society, which means that everyone is threatened and anyone could be found to be an enemy of the movement. In addition, an effective ideology renders the free choice of perpetrators as well as victims obsolete.

Arendt gives the example of Himmler's selection of SS candidates "from photographs according to purely racial criteria," as if "Nature itself decided, not only who was to be eliminated, but also who was to be trained as an executioner" (Arendt 1968b, 468). Thus, the inability to act – the result of terror – combined with the inability to think – the result of ideology – is pervasive among the perpetrators of totalitarian crimes as well as among the victims. In fact, for Arendt, no one typifies the totalitarian personality better than Adolf Eichmann, one of the worst criminals of them all.

The astounding thing about Eichmann, according to Arendt's account of his trial in Jerusalem in 1961, was that it was "sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of [the years of Nazi rule]" (Arendt 2006b, 287-288). This man, who transported millions of European Jews to their death, was "not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain," she writes (ibid., 287). "He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*," she concludes (ibid.). That such horribly evil acts could be committed without a thought, as it were, is what she means by the "banality" of evil.[7]

Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" was the result of his "almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view," according to Arendt (ibid., 47-48). In other words, he completely lacked the capacity for what Gotthold Lessing called "independent thinking." "Nowhere was this flaw more conspicuous than in his account" of the "happiest and most successful period" of his life in Vienna, 1938, when he received his "first important job:" the expulsion of Austrian Jews, which was funded by extorting rich Jews to pay for the poor ones to

[7] On this, see Benhabib 1988, 30; Bernstein 2008; Herzog 2002; Kohn 2002; Young-Breuhl 1982.

leave (ibid., 44, 48). As he describes it, "[h]e and his men and the Jews were all 'pulling together,' and whenever there were any difficulties the Jewish functionaries would come running to him 'to unburden their hearts,' to tell him 'all their grief and sorrow,' and to ask him for his help" (ibid., 48). "The Jews," as he saw it, "'desired' to emigrate, and he, Eichmann, was there to help them, because it so happened that at the time the Nazi authorities had expressed a desire to see their Reich *judenrein*" (ibid.). To his mind, then, he had been able to do "'justice to both parties'" (ibid.).

Another example of this startling incapacity has been highlighted by Elisabeth Young-Breuhl in her article, "Reflections on Hannah Arendt's the Life of the Mind" (Young-Breuhl 1982). Eichmann, disgusted and horrified by what he saw on his several visits to the killing centers in the east – Chelmno, Treblinka, Auschwitz – strove, "not against these disgusting actions, but against his own disgust, his (in Arendt's phrase) 'innate repugnance toward crime'" (ibid., 296). "Once he had done this," she continues, "he no longer judged, no longer put himself in any other man's place" (ibid.). Faced with something horribly wrong, his solution was to suppress how he felt.

This repression of his moral scruples culminated in his "Pontius Pilate" moment, at the infamous Wannsee Conference in January 1942, where the so-called "Final Solution" was decided. As Arendt narrates, "[a]lthough he had been doing his best right along to help with the Final Solution, he had still harbored some doubts about 'such a bloody solution through violence,' and these doubts had now been dispelled" (Arendt 2006b, 114). What dispelled his doubts was the fact that "the most prominent people had spoken, the Popes of the Third Reich," and "[n]ow he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, not only Heydrich or the 'sphinx' Müller, not just the S.S. or the Party, but the élite of the good old Civil Service were

vying and fighting with each other for the honor of taking the lead in these 'bloody' matters" (ibid.). "At that moment," he recalled, "I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt" (ibid.). From then on, he had the "modesty" not to judge the morality of the Final Solution (ibid.).

Thus, Eichmann, like other obedient, law-abiding citizens of the Third Reich, adopted the new commandment, "Thou shalt kill," and dispensed with the old, "Thou shalt not kill" (ibid., 150). Of course, Eichmann was not alone in his thoughtless abandonment of traditional morality; it was a mass phenomenon, the "best proof" of which, according to Arendt, "was perhaps the incredible remark Eichmann's lawyer, who had never belonged to the Nazi Party, made twice during the trial in Jerusalem, to the effect that what had happened in Auschwitz and the other extermination camps had been 'a medical matter'" (Arendt 2003, 43). To Arendt, this mindless mass transition from good to evil revealed morality to be a mere set of *mores*, conventional rules "which could be exchanged for another set with no more trouble that it would take to change the table manners of a whole people" (ibid.). "Eichmann's banality," as George Kateb notes, is therefore merely "an active and highly placed example of the morality of mores" (Kateb 2007, 829).

It was precisely this abject *shallowness* that Eichmann exemplified that Arendt found so disturbing. "The deeds were monstrous," of that there was no doubt, "but the doer … was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt 1978, 4). Eichmann was a "nobody" – except this "nobody" was guilty of sending millions of human beings to their death. In his zeal for "following orders" and "doing his duty," he never once took the time to stop and think.

Had he done so, and had many individuals done so, perhaps they would have acted differently, and perhaps what happened would not have taken on the horrible dimensions it did. This may sound like a ludicrous suggestion, but consider what happened during the Nazi occupation of Denmark. "When the Germans approached them rather cautiously about introducing the yellow badge," Arendt narrates, "they were simply told that the King would be the first to wear it, and the Danish government officials were careful to point out that anti-Jewish measures of any sort would cause their own immediate resignation" (Arendt 2006b, 171). They were not even able to sort out the "stateless" Jewish refugees from the native population, which, Arendt notes, "must have surprised the Germans to no end, since it appeared so 'illogical' for a government to protect people to whom it had categorically denied naturalization and even permission to work" (ibid., 172). Due to these obstructions, the mass deportation of Denmark's Jews had to be postponed until 1943, and even then, due to advance notice given out by the Danish government, only 477 of the more than 7,800 people the Nazis were looking for fell into their hands. It is only unfortunate that this "is the only case we know of in which the Nazis met with *open* native resistance" (ibid., 175).

But what is most interesting about this above example is that Denmark's resistance seems to have changed the minds of the Nazis who were sent to handle the problem. When the mass deportation was being prepared, police units had to be sent from Germany due to the "unreliability" of the occupying force, headed by Dr. Werner Best (ibid., 173). At the last minute, this Dr. Best informed these reinforcement units that they could not "break into apartments, because the Danish police might then interfere, and they were not supposed to fight it out with the Danes" (ibid.). This meant "they could seize only those Jews who voluntarily opened their doors" (ibid.). Most of the rest made their way by boat to Sweden, which had recently closed its borders to German troops.

Concerning this outcome, Dr. Best said, "the objective of the operation was not to seize a great number of Jews but to clean Denmark of Jews, and this objective has now been achieved" (ibid., 175).

Thus, in contrast to Eichmann, who only did his duty, the occupying forces in Denmark "apparently no longer looked upon the extermination of a whole people as a matter of course" (ibid.). "They had met resistance based on principle," Arendt continues, "and their 'toughness' had melted like butter in the sun, they had even been able to show a few timid beginnings of genuine courage" (ibid.). That is to say, Denmark's resistance gave them pause to *think*, and this moment of thought later gave them the resolve to *act* – an outcome which spared thousands of lives.

This example demonstrates perhaps more clearly than any other the link between thought and action. It also highlights why a "nobody" like Eichmann can do more evil than the worst of villains. Because Eichmann never thought, he had no principles and he had no character, and because he lacked these, he was incapable of acting on his own or resisting the forces of evil. While he was certainly no mere "cog in the machine" – he was altogether too careerist for that – it was his very "banality," his utter mediocrity as a human being, that made him suitable for the job.

Natality

Were totalitarianism to be perfectly realized, human beings would be reduced to "nobodies" like Eichmann, mindlessly obeying orders in the march towards dehumanization. Human behavior would become predictable through the systematic application of terror, and all thinking would be harnessed to the unfolding of ideological doctrine. The line between perpetrator

and victim would become increasingly blurred in the intensification of the process of annihilation. Every notion of what makes life "specifically human" would be lost as the lives of individual human beings are swallowed up by this lethal process and immediately forgotten (Arendt 1998, 97).

Happily, then, totalitarianism "bears the germs of its own destruction" (Arendt 1968b, 478). It is undone by what Arendt calls "the supreme capacity of man:" to begin anew (ibid., 479). "This beginning," she writes, "is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man" (ibid.). This is the "miracle" of human life: with every new birth, a new chapter – a new life story – has begun. The only way to prevent this from happening would be to wipe out the human species in its entirety, which of course would mean the end of totalitarianism – despite its inhumanity – as well.

"Natality" – "the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" – is what Arendt calls this "miraculous" event (Arendt 1998, 247). It serves as the final, ontological basis for her belief that what makes us "specifically human" is that our lives are "full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography" (ibid., 97). Moreover, for Arendt it is "[t]he miracle that saves the world" from oblivion and ruin: "Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope," she writes (ibid.).

In other words, "natality" is what ultimately guarantees the plurality required for politics. It is the irreducible uniqueness of each individual that makes their entry into the world their first great "act" – even though being born is truly the height of passive experience in the life of anyone.[8]

[8] It is also an "act" that is unmistakably a fruit of "labor." The oddness of Arendt's "natality" has been noted by Roberto Esposito (Esposito 2008, 177-178) as well as Miguel Vatter (Vatter 2006, 152).

Due to natality, human beings enter the world as actors, each one a unique "beginning" in human history.

Unavoidably, these new "beginnings" constantly upset the "course" of history. Each new life story has an effect, however small, on the lives of others and thus, on a grand scale, on history. This is what Arendt refers to as the "web of human relationships," where each life represents a single thread and the entangled mass of threads represents "history," the collective story of humanity. This "web," designed to absorb the shocks of the daily "miracles" of human life, is ultimately stronger and more durable than totalitarianism's "iron band," which breaks before it bends.

However, this "miraculous" victory should not be taken for granted even if it is inevitable. In the meantime, many lives will be lost to oblivion, unremembered and unredeemed by meaning. Moreover, many lives will lose their distinctively human shape, stunted in action and in thought. Even in "dark times" – let alone totalitarianism – the "web of human relationships" weakens, as the connections to others through word and deed becomes more tenuous and individual threads unfold as if in freefall, unconnected to the life spans of others. If anything, Arendt's valorization of "biographability" as what makes life "specifically human" should make us wary of seeking redemption in historical outcomes, rather than in each and every individual's life story (Sitze 2002, 112).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined Arendt's notion of the "biographic self;" cautioned against the "autobiographic mistake," which is to confuse one's "inner self" for one's "biographic self;" clarified the relation of the "biographic self" to the "thinking ego;" linked our freedom to act to

our freedom to think; illustrated, through Arendt's description of totalitarianism, what human life would be reduced to without these qualities; exemplified the inhumanity of totalitarianism through the life of Adolf Eichmann; and revealed the ontological underpinnings of Arendt's faith in the "miracle" of human life: that every newborn child initiates a new story, a new chapter in human history.

In doing so, I hope to have shown that biography makes us who we are, not vice versa. Just as we do not arrive on earth fully formed, we are not the sovereign authors of our life story. Our life is written through the course of action that we take, and we do not know in advance what course this will be. It is this course of action – real and irreversible – that solidifies our identity. We achieve no such solidity in our inner life: our thoughts and feelings are shapeshifting, fleeting, and in a certain sense impersonal. For Arendt, the "I" that thinks is simply a grammatical artifice, and on more than one occasion she associates our emotional and sentimental life with animality. Though thoughts and sentiments surely inform and add color to what we do, they do not identify us.

Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism teaches us these lessons well, albeit in negative fashion. Totalitarianism is a process of dehumanization that begins with the repression of political action, proceeds with the elimination of critical thought, and culminates in the erasure of individuality. One's "biographic self" is reduced to an interchangeable, expendable specimen of human biology.

In the next chapter, I will return to these questions of totalitarianism and dehumanization. Through the work of Giorgio Agamben, we will revisit these issues from a different perspective. And this perspective will reveal a dangerous aspect of Arendt's notion of the "biographic self:" the way she stakes our humanity on our identity. For Agamben, dehumanization is impossible because there is no need for us to "become" human or "prove" our humanity by having a story to

tell. Humanity is an anonymous quality; we do not have to make a name for ourselves to be human. Though there are issues and difficulties with Agamben's thought as well, which we shall discuss in the next chapter, this insight is an important step forward from Arendt's account. Let us proceed.

2 – To Be or To Be Able to Be? Giorgio Agamben on the Potentiality of Humanity

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I showed how Hannah Arendt's conviction that "biographability" (Sitze 2002, 112) is what makes us "specifically human" (Arendt 1998, 97) was formed in response to the threat of totalitarianism and in particular the dehumanizing atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps. In this chapter, we will show how, beginning from Arendt's work, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben comes to a completely different understanding of what these camps reveal about our humanity. Contra Arendt, Agamben argues that human life is not "biographable." It is not what we do, but what we are able to do that makes us human. It is our "potentiality" that matters.

Arendt's influence on Agamben is clear from his use of her idiosyncratic distinction between *zōē* – biological life – and *bios* – human life.[9] However, he uses these terms to make a very different point. Unlike Arendt, he does not valorize "specifically human" life over "life itself." To the contrary, he argues that the separation and exclusion of "life itself" from our notion of what it means to be human is the beginning of a "biopolitics" culminating in the concentration camp.[10]

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[9] In his critique of Agamben's use of this distinction, James Gordon Finlayson notes that it was not "The Greeks" but Arendt who "originated the thesis that the economic, biological, and instinctual bases of human association … are *opposed to* and *excluded from* political life, and the idea that what the Greeks called *zōē* is opposed to and excluded from *bios*" (Finlayson 2010, 102-103).

[10] Agamben appropriates the concept of "biopolitics" from Michel Foucault. However, as with his borrowings from Arendt, Agamben's use of the term is radically different from Foucault's. Whereas Foucault argues that biopolitics is a phenomenon originating in modern Europe, concomitant with the rise of capitalism and the nation-state (Foucault 1990a; 2003b; 2007; 2008), Agamben understands all Western politics since Aristotle as "biopolitical." This un-Foucauldian use of a Foucauldian concept has drawn much commentary and criticism (Blencowe 2010; Patton in Calarco and DeCaroli, eds. 2007, 203-218; Koopman 2015; Lemke 2005; Rabinow and Rose 2006).

Agamben argues that the separation and exclusion of *zōē* from *bios* begins with Aristotle. He writes: "When Aristotle defined the end of the perfect community in a passage [of the *Politics*] that was to become canonical for the political tradition of the West (1252b, 30), he did so precisely by opposing the simple fact of living (*to zen*) to politically qualified life (*to eu zen*)," (Agamben 1998, 2).[11] For Aristotle, political life is "the good life," the teleological culmination of human being. There is a difference in kind between living "the good life" and the mere fact of "life itself."

However, Agamben notes that the exclusion of *zōē* from *bios* is also a form of inclusion. Echoing Arendt's analysis of the distinction between the public and the private realms in ancient Greece (see Arendt 1998, 22-78), Agamben observes that *zōē* is the concern of the *oikos* – the household – an institution that is at once the foundation of public life and something separate from it. Thus, as a household concern, *zōē* is at once excluded from and included in everyday political life.

This simultaneous exclusion and inclusion creates a third kind of life that Agamben calls "bare life." "Bare life" is the politicized form of *zōē*, placed outside of yet subject to political power. Borrowing from the infamous Weimar-era legal theorist and later Nazi jurist, Carl Schmitt, Agamben uses the term "state of exception" to describe the precariousness of bare life. In doing so, he links bare life to the "paradox of sovereignty" that concerns Schmitt (Schmitt 2005, 15). The latter "consists in the fact the [sic] sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order," Agamben explains; that the sovereign can legally suspend the law by proclaiming a state of exception (ibid.). This sovereign act, Agamben would have us believe, is the same as the act by which *zōē* is placed at once outside and inside the political community. He writes: "the

[11] It is worth noting, however, that this canonical passage does not even use the term *bios* – only *zōē*.

inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power…. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception" (ibid., 6).

Thus, what Agamben finds significant about modern politics is "not so much the inclusion of *zoē* in the *polis* – which is," according to him, "absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power" (ibid., 9). "Instead," he submits, "the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rules, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm" (ibid.). In brief, Agamben is claiming that in modern politics, "the state of exception" is fast becoming the rule,[12] with the dire consequence that human life is increasingly threatened with the reduction to "bare life."

This threat is depicted in stark terms by Agamben's choice of "paradigm" for the situation in which the "state of exception" becomes the rule: the Nazi concentration camp. "In the camp," he writes, "the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order" (ibid., 168-169). Not coincidentally, according to Agamben, "the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life" (ibid., 171). Because he sees the camp as the place where the sovereign decision and the production of "bare life" coincide, he proclaims that it is the "biopolitical paradigm of the modern" and "the hidden matrix of the politics in which

[12] For his most empirically grounded account of this trend, see *The State of Exception* (Agamben 2005).

we are still living" (ibid., 175). Thus, whereas for Arendt the camps were a specific phenomenon, Agamben universalizes the threat of the camp by suggesting that it reveals the logic of political life.[13]

This thesis leads Agamben to an assessment of the human condition that is practically the opposite of Arendt's. While he relies on her distinction between *zōē* and *bios*, the point of this distinction, for him, is not to restore the prestige of the "man of action" but to show the lethal consequences of the inclusive exclusion of *zōē* in our idea of what it means to be a human being. His ongoing *Homo Sacer* series (Agamben 1998; 1999b; 2005; 2011a; 2011c; 2013a; 2013b; 2015; 2016) is united under his attempt to articulate an idea of humanity that does not result in "bare life."

This chapter will seek to grasp Agamben's reconception of humanity through several steps. The first step is a consideration of *der Muselmann* – concentration camp slang referring to inmates on the brink of death and no longer responsive, described in many survivors' reports on the camps (see above all Levi 1986; 1987; 1988; as well as Langbein 2004 and Levi and de Benedetti 2006) – in whom Agamben sees not only "the perfect cipher of the camp" but also, perhaps perversely, the paradigm for a new understanding of what it means to be human (Agamben 1999b, 48). This is due to the fact that although the *Muselmann* is the terminal point of the biopolitical logic that separates and excludes "bare life" from what is human, the *Muselmann* remains a human being.

[13] This provocative thesis, unsurprisingly, has not infrequently been met with deep disagreement and plain disbelief. Ernesto Laclau expresses both: "By unifying the whole process of modern political construction around the extreme and absurd paradigm of the concentration camp, Agamben does more than present a distorted history: he blocks any possible exploration of the emancipatory possibilities opened by our modern heritage" (Laclau in Calarco and DeCaroli, eds. 2007, 22).

The *Muselmann*, who neither speaks nor acts, but who is not for this reason inhuman, reveals that humanity cannot be defined by its activity – or its "biographability," as we have seen Arendt argue.

To grasp Agamben's idea of humanity, we must engage with two interrelated ideas: "infancy" and "potentiality." As Leland de la Durantaye observes, these are the two essential ideas that define Agamben's thought (de la Durantaye 2009, 128-129). The former, "infancy," refers to the fact that human beings are not born with the gift of speech – they must "acquire" it. As Nicholas Chare observes, this moment of acquisition "institutes a gap between man the linguistic being and man as simple, living being" (Chare 2006, 42). This is because the subject of discourse, "I" – "a purely linguistic-functional entity" (Agamben 2007, 25) – does not coincide with the reality of the individual human as a living entity. "Infancy" is Agamben's name for this lived reality.

The "desubjectification" of the human being at work in Agamben's idea of "infancy" is, however, only an intermediate step on the way to a new ontology of humanity as "potentiality." As Daniel Heller-Roazen writes in his introduction to Agamben's *Potentialities*, "What is at issue in the concept of potentiality is nothing less than a mode of existence that is irreducible to actuality" (Agamben 1999a, 14). Humanity, for Agamben, is not reducible to actuality because its specific quality is its *lack*: our freedom to do this or that comes from our freedom to *not do* anything at all. This challenges Arendt's notion of "biographability" – that human life takes shape in actuality, through the performance of actions – by arguing that our humanity has no need to be actualized. For Agamben, we do not need to *do* anything in order to live a human life. For him, it "is a matter of living the life that we live as if we were *not* living the specific set of events that compose our biography but rather the pure potentiality of the (force of) life for which and in which we live" (Chiesa and Ruda 2011, 172). Agamben asks us to detach our humanity from our identity.

Der Muselmann

Der Muselmann, which means "the muslim" in German, was the word used by inmates of the Nazi concentration camps to describe fellow inmates who through starvation, exhaustion, and brutalization had come to resemble "the living dead:" silent, expressionless, and unthinking.[14] Though millions were murdered before this could happen to them, Agamben argues that the *Muselmann* is paradigmatic of the logic of Auschwitz. He submits that "we will not understand what Auschwitz is if we do not first understand who or what the *Muselmann* is" (Agamben 1999b, 52).[15]

In this assessment, Agamben is in accordance with Primo Levi, who writes that the *Muselmänner* are "the complete witnesses" of what was done at Auschwitz (Levi 1988, 84). But this assessment brings us to a paradox of which Levi is painfully aware: the *Muselmänner*, as a rule, did not survive, and therefore the "true witnesses" have left behind no testimony (ibid., 83). "The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death" he writes (ibid., 84). Thus, when survivors such as Levi

[14] It is unclear why this term was used, but there are some closely related theories: either their rigid comportment evoked stereotypical images of Islamic prayer rituals, or their submissive fatalism evoked perceived notions of Islamic spirituality (Agamben 1999b, 44-45; see Rana 2007, 157-158).

[15] Agamben uses the name "Auschwitz" instead of the names "Holocaust" or "Shoah" to refer to the extermination of the European Jews. For why he does this, see Agamben 1999b, 28-31. For his justification of the use of Auschwitz and *der Muselmann* as historical paradigms – as well as an explanation of what he means by the term "paradigm" in the first place – see Agamben 2009, 9-31. For a critique of these paradigms and a suggestion of alternatives – the "colony" and "the colonial subject" – see Robert Eaglestone, "On Giorgio Agamben's Holocaust" (Eaglestone 2002). See also Levi and Rothberg, who criticize Agamben for "transforming [the *Muselmann*] into a fetish, the sole site of the truth of the camps," and for his de-historicizing emphasis "simply that such a figure happened, not where and how he became possible" (Levi and Rothberg 2003, 30-31).

himself speak as witnesses, they do it "'on behalf of third parties'" and "in their stead, by proxy" (ibid.).

This paradoxical situation of the surviving witness is doubled by the truth that not only did the *Muselmänner* leave no testimony behind, but in addition they had nothing anymore to say. This is the conclusion that Levi comes to in his disquieting and unforgettable description of their fate:

> All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story: they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea…. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand (Levi 1987, 96).

To bear witness as a survivor of the camps is to tell the story of those who have no story left to tell.

Agamben recognizes that "Levi's paradox," as he calls it, makes it seemingly impossible to understand the *Muselmann* and therefore to understand Auschwitz. These "complete witnesses" did not live to tell their story, and even if they had, they had no story left to tell. Moreover, Levi calls them "non-men," signifying that not only is he hesitant to label them living or dead, but that he is also hesitant to call them human beings anymore at all. The ironic title that he gives his memoir of his time in Auschwitz, *If This Is a Man*, indicates his pause. But if this is the case – if, in some sense, the *Muselmann* is no longer a human being – then survivors such as Levi who speak in their stead are claiming to speak in the name of inhuman beings. This is the height of Levi's paradox.

The most straightforward way to confront this paradox, as suggested by Arendt's analysis of the camps, is to argue that survivors such as Levi speak as the human witnesses of

dehumanization. They saw human beings, once capable of speech and action, reduced to unresponsive, barely present husks, their imminent death become "as superfluous as their lives had been" (Kohn 2002, 640). Indeed, "[a]t first," Agamben writes, "it appears that it is the human, the survivor, who bears witness to the inhuman, the *Muselmann*" (Agamben 1999b, 120). But this does not do justice to Levi's paradox: it fails to take seriously his claim that the *Muselmänner* are the "true" and "complete" witnesses of what happened at the camps, and that the testimony given by survivors is merely a "proxy" for the missing testimony of the *Muselmänner* themselves. To take his claim seriously is to admit that "it is in some way the *Muselmann*," not the human survivor, "who bears witness … that the human is nothing other than the agent of the inhuman" (ibid., 120).

This would mean that the relation between the human and the inhuman is unsettlingly intimate. In fact, unless we are to understand Levi's "proxy" testimony as an anthropomorphizing fiction, it means that there is something human about the inhumanity of the *Muselmann* – and perhaps something inhuman about the humanity of the survivor – that makes it possible for the latter to speak on behalf of the former. Though this may be disconcerting, it is better than the alternative, which Agamben condemns in the strongest terms: "Simply to deny the *Muselmann*'s humanity would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture" (ibid., 63). In his reading of Levi's testimony, then, the *Muselmann* is not simply a "non-man" but more precisely an "indefinite being" that "marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman" and which in turn calls our understanding of "humanity" into question (ibid., 48, 55). Agamben submits that there is something human *about* the very inhumanity of the *Muselmann*, and vice versa about the human.

This threshold figure of the *Muselmann* compels Agamben to redefine what it means to be human. He approaches this redefinition through a phenomenology of shame, which he intends as

the basis for an "*Ethica more Auschwitz demonstrata*" (ibid., 13).[16] This time, the key passage comes from Robert Antelme rather than Primo Levi, and concerns not the *Muselmann* but a young Italian prisoner shot by the SS for slowing a march to transfer prisoners from Buchenwald to Dachau:

> …. He turned pink after the SS man said to him, '*Du komme hier!*' He must have glanced about him before he flushed; but yes, it was he who had been picked, and when he doubted it no longer, he turned pink. The SS who was looking for a man, any man, to kill, had found him. And having found him, he looked no further. He didn't ask himself: Why him, instead of someone else? And the Italian, having understood it was really him, accepted his chance selection. He didn't wonder: Why me, instead of someone else? (Antelme 1992, 231-232).

"Why," asks Agamben, "does the student from Bologna blush?" (Agamben 1999b, 104). "It is as if the flush on his cheeks momentarily betrayed a limit that was reached, as if something like a new ethical material were touched upon in the living being" (ibid.). This "new ethical material," Agamben will argue, is the feeling of shame that a human being feels upon being identified as a subject.

Shame, then, according to Agamben, "is nothing less than the fundamental sentiment of being a *subject*" (ibid., 107). This is because subjectification is simultaneously desubjectification; the possibility of speaking is simultaneously an impossibility of speaking. Agamben explains: in order to become a speaking subject, "the psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter 'I,' which is absolutely without any substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse" (ibid., 116). In other words, when a human being speaks, when they identify as "I," a rift opens between the human being as a subject of discourse

[16] I will be leaving aside Agamben's concern with ethics in order to focus on his idea of the human. Regarding his ethics, see Catherine Mills' essay in Norris, ed. 2005, 198-221, and Guenther 2012.

and the human being as a living thing. The remainder of this split, what Agamben calls the "self," cannot help but feel ashamed of the muteness of their "bare life" (ibid., 112). This is why, according to Agamben, the young Italian prisoner blushes with shame when the SS call him forward.

Having developed this phenomenology of shame through a reading of Antelme, Agamben returns to apply it to "Levi's paradox" in order to articulate the nature of the uncanny intimacy between the human survivor who bears witness and the mute, inhuman *Muselmann*. Agamben argues that these two figures correspond to the simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification revealed in shame: the survivor is the subject of discourse, and the *Muselmann* is the mute living being. In the testimony of the survivor, the *Muselmann*'s impossibility of speech is brought to speech. The survivor acknowledges that they have nothing to say – that they are not the "true" or "complete" witness of what happened because their subjectivity is literally only a figure of speech, an "I" – and in doing so, bear witness to the impossibility of speech that defines the *Muselmann*. The desubjectification of the human as a living being is witnessed by the human as a speaking subject.

The important point, though, is that this relation between the subject and the living being is not merely or primarily a relation between two beings – the human survivor and the inhuman *Muselmann* – but something much more intimate: it is how the human being relates to itself. Ultimately, Agamben's argument is that there is a *Muselmann* – a mute, inhuman living being – in all of us. We – who were all once infants that could not speak – are *all* human survivors of this being. What the *Muselmann* shows, however, is that this inhuman being living inside us can also survive us – that when it is no longer possible for us to speak, we remain as mute beings, as "bare life."

This brings us to Agamben's final point about the nature of testifying to the *Muselmann*: "It concerns the subject's capacity to have or not to have language" (ibid., 145-146). In the end, what the *Muselmann* reveals is not so much that human beings are also inhuman beings, but rather the deeper truth that humans are not simply speaking beings but more precisely *potentially* speaking beings: "The human being is the speaking being, the living being who has language, because the human is capable of *not having* language, because it is capable of its own in-fancy" (ibid., 146).

Infancy

"Infancy" is the indeterminate point between animality and humanity, the original lack of distinction between animal voice (*phoné*) and human speech (*logos*) (Agamben 2006, 84). Although Agamben states that "[w]hat distinguishes man from animal is language" (Agamben 2004, 36), what he actually means is something more specific: "It is not language in general that marks out the human from other living beings… but the split between language and speech, between semiotic and semantic… between sign systems and discourse" (Agamben 2007, 59). Infancy, then, is the moment when the human being – like the animal – dwells in language but lacks speech. Sure, infants may laugh, cry, yell, point their fingers, and give names to things, but they do not form full sentences and they do not identify themselves as subjects of discourse – as "I."

However, unlike other animals, human beings have the potential to do so. And when they inevitably do, they lose their animal-like oneness with language and split themselves in two: on the one hand, they remain animals, but in the face of discourse animality is inarticulate and mute; on the other hand, they become discursive subjects, but this subjectivity refers only to discourse.

This is the specifically human dilemma of "having" the faculty of language, as Alex Murray notes: "The donkey or the cricket in not having an abstracted language seem to have their own 'voice,' or a direct way of communicating. Mankind can only use language, yet that language is unnatural, something learnt. Therefore language doesn't belong to us. We don't 'own' it, yet we consistently and constantly use it" (Murray 2010, 13). The cost of learning to speak is the loss of our own voice.

It is important to emphasize, however, that for Agamben infancy is not a stage of human development that is surpassed and superseded once human beings learn how to speak. Instead, for him, infancy is the transcendent, permanent structure of the relation of human beings to language. He speaks of the individual as "*having been and still being an infant*" (Agamben 2007, 58). Indeed, an individual cannot speak without making noise, even if noise as such is not meaningful speech. The structure of human language is this frustrated relation between the noisy but inarticulate voice of the infant and the articulate but empty and anonymous speech of the discursive subject.

What this structure of human language reveals, according to Agamben, is "potentiality." For him, the only way to make sense of the paradox that human beings both have and do not have language is to understand human beings as potential beings. In terms of potentiality, the capacity to have is bound to the capacity to lack; the capacity to do is bound to the capacity to not do. Hence, "infancy," the potential to speak or not to speak that defines the relation between human beings and language, points us to the fundamental fact that it is potentiality that makes us human beings.

Potentiality

With his idea of potentiality, Agamben generalizes and radicalizes the insights gained from his investigation of the "infantile" structure of the human being's relation to language. If "infancy" teaches us that the human being is not simply a speaking being but a being that can or cannot speak, "potentiality" broadens this definition: the human being is not simply an active being but a being that can or cannot act. This broadening leads Agamben to make the more radical claim that the existence of human beings is not reducible to what they actually do. That is to say, what begins as a discussion of human faculties ends up as an analysis of the mode of human existence. "'To have a faculty' means *to have* a privation," writes Agamben, "And potentiality is not a logical hypostasis but the mode of existence of this privation" (Agamben 1999a, 179). From the observation that our faculties exist even when we do not make use of them, Agamben reasons that it is not the things we do that make us human. It is what we are able to do, whether or not we do it.

Agamben develops his notion of human being as potential through a wide-ranging engagement with Aristotle, from his natural scientific and metaphysical investigations to his ethics and politics. The purpose of this engagement is perhaps clearest if we begin with the latter pair, discussed in Agamben's essay, "The Work of Man" (Calarco and DeCaroli, eds. 2007, 1-10). Here, he offers a critique of Aristotle's conception of human specificity, the extraordinary "work" that Aristotle believes humans and humans alone are tasked with: living "in accordance with *logos*" (ibid., 4). Agamben notes that "Aristotle is careful to specify that the work of man cannot be a mere potentiality or faculty, but only the *energeia* and the exercise of his faculty" (ibid.). To live in accordance with reason and fulfill the "work of man," we must put our faculty of reason to use.

This brings us to Agamben's critique: citing Averroes and Dante as his predecessors, Agamben recognizes, contrary to Aristotle's insistence that what is potential needs to be actualized, "the moment of potentiality as the specific characteristic of man" (ibid., 6-7). From this perspective, it is unimportant whether potential is actualized or not: actualization is merely one possibility of potentiality, not its culmination or validation. For Agamben, humans are human whether or not they put their reasoning faculty to use because the very faculty alone makes them human.

While this gives us a general idea of Agamben's contention with Aristotle, digging deeper into this debate requires a consideration of how he treats Aristotle's natural scientific and metaphysical texts. Agamben's argument becomes much subtler, resting upon ambiguities in the *Metaphysics*. The standard interpretation of this text is that Aristotle ranks actuality higher than potentiality in the hierarchy of being because potentiality exists for the sake of actuality, not vice versa (Witt 2003, 13). For instance, while it makes sense to say that the possibility of speech exists for the sake of speaking, it makes no sense to say that speaking exists for the sake of the possibility of speech. In addition, for Aristotle, "not all actualities are the realizations of potentialities" (ibid.). For example, an eternal, perfect being – that is, God – has nothing possible about it; it is always actual. Such considerations suggest that potentiality is more "dependent" on actuality than vice versa: without actualization, potentiality seems pointless, but actuality can be perfect on its own (ibid.).

Nonetheless, Aristotle goes to great lengths to defend the existence of potentiality against the Megarians, an ancient sect of philosophers who argue that everything that is, is actually. To the Megarians, someone is only a speaker when they are speaking, only a builder when they are building, and only brave or honorable or wise when doing brave, honorable, or wise things.

According to them, what exists is actual and therefore the idea of potentiality is an illusion or at best redundant, because someone can only prove that they are able by actually exercising their ability.

Aristotle counters the Megarians with a series of arguments: they cannot explain the existence of skills, talents, or habits; they cannot provide a convincing account of passive potentialities, such as the potential to be seen (if no one sees me, am I therefore actually invisible?); and in general they cannot explain the phenomena of change and motion (ibid., 20-21). Of these arguments, it is the first with which Agamben preoccupies himself and upon which he bases his reinterpretation of Aristotle because it concerns the existence of something regardless of actuality. For skills, talents, and habits exist even in those moments when their possessors do not perform them.

To get at this idea, "Aristotle begins by distinguishing two kinds of potentiality," as Agamben notes (Agamben 1999a, 179). Agamben names these two kinds "generic" and "existing" potentiality (ibid.). Generic potentiality covers the range of abstract possibilities and includes all cases that are not strictly speaking impossible. For instance, anyone can win the lottery. But potentialities like these are mostly trivial and give us very little sense of what our true capacities are. Existing potentiality, on the other hand, refers to things like skills, talents, and habits. For instance, a musician who has learned to play the banjo possesses the potentiality to play it any time they choose, meaning that this potential exists even when it is not brought into use (barring exceptional circumstances, such as incapacitating injuries or illnesses, etc.). This is clearly different from the generic potential of anyone to learn the banjo, a potential whose existence is limited to its formulation as an abstract logical possibility. A person with no musical training does

not presently possess the ability to play the banjo, although it is possible that someday they will learn.

The importance of the idea of existing potentiality for Agamben's philosophy is that "[i]t is a potentiality that is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality" (ibid., 179-180). Whether a trained musician plays an instrument at any given moment is irrelevant: once they have learned how to play music they have become a musician. According to Agamben, this means that musicians exist in the mode of potentiality: it would be more accurate to say "they are able to be" rather than "they are" because "[w]hat is potential is capable (*endekhetai*), [as] Aristotle says, both of being and of not being" (ibid., 182).

Of course, this mode of existence – "to be able to be" rather than simply "to be" – is not something unique to musicians: it is quintessentially human. In an essay entitled "On What We Can Not Do," Agamben writes: "While fire can only burn, and other living beings are only capable of their own specific potentialities – they are capable of this or that behavior inscribed into their biological vocation – human beings are the animals capable of their own impotentiality" (Agamben 2011b, 44). The essence of humanity is not what we do, but our freedom to choose whether to do it.

With this notion of "impotentiality," Agamben seeks to subvert the conventional wisdom that ranks actuality more highly than potentiality. As he reads Aristotle, "*if a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such*" (Agamben 1999a, 183). That is to say, if "impotentiality" is what proves the existence of potentiality, then what proves one's potential is the demonstration that one has the potential not to do whatever it is one can do.

But this inverts the traditional notion that potentiality exists for the sake of actuality: in such an instance, actuality exists for the sake of potentiality. As Nahum Brown writes, Agamben's aim is to make it such that "it *should never be clear* to the reader of Book *Theta* [of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*] whether actuality or potentiality precedes" (Brown 2013, 170). It is "undecidable" (ibid.).

Agamben finds the exemplary instance of "impotentiality" in Herman Melville's "Bartleby" (Melville 1986, 1-46). It is the story of a copyist named Bartleby who worked in a New York law office, told from the perspective of his former employer, who remains mystified by Bartleby's (non)actions at the office. It boils down to this: when asked to write, Bartleby, a copyist by trade (i.e., someone with the "existing" potentiality to write) would simply respond, "I would prefer not to." With this simple phrase, Agamben believes, Bartleby manifests his potentiality not to.

In this way, Bartleby eludes identification as a copyist and compels others to wonder *who* he is. His response to requests that he write, "I would prefer not to," indicates that he is able to be a copyist – and therefore able to not be a copyist as well – rather than that he simply *is* a copyist. Through his inaction, Bartleby reveals the contingency, inessentiality, and potentiality of his being *as* a copyist, thereby opening up new possibilities for himself, new ways for himself to be and to do.

Therefore Bartleby, as Rasmus Ugilt Holten Jensen notes, "is the image of freedom" from Agamben's perspective (Jensen 2006, 147). "In Bartleby's formula 'I would prefer not to,'" Jensen continues, "Agamben finds a genuine expression of a pure potentiality which has nothing actualized to it, even though the expression of it is an act" (ibid., 146). Bartleby performs the remarkable feat of demonstrating his ability to be or not to be, to do or not to do, with one simple

phrase. This phrase, "I would prefer not to," neither posits nor negates, neither wills nor refuses, but simply leaves open the possibility of doing or not doing, and being or not being, anything at all.

The form of this freedom is what Agamben calls "absolute contingency." "In first philosophy," he writes, "a being that can both be and not be is said to be contingent" (Agamben 1999a, 261). With this idea of "absolute contingency," Agamben decisively rejects Aristotle's idea that humanity has been given a "work" or a "task" to complete, or a historical "destiny" to fulfill. But he qualifies this rejection, adding that he "does not mean, however, that humans are not, and do not have to be, something" (Agamben 1993, 43). "There is in effect something that humans are and have to be," he admits, "but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's existence as possibility or potentiality*" (ibid.). To live a human life is to live a life of latency, to live life as if it could always be otherwise than how it actually has been.

What Bartleby ultimately represents, then, is the "unwriting" – the erasure – of biography. Nothing happens to Bartleby, and Bartleby himself does nothing. His life lacks the eventfulness that gives life its "specifically human," biographic form for Arendt. As Agamben puts it, Bartleby is "nothing other than his white sheet;" his life is the blank page upon which he "would prefer not to" write (ibid., 253-254). Confronted with this, the narrator in Melville's tale is at a loss: "While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done" (Melville 1986, 3). "I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man," he continues, "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable" (ibid.). As Arne de Boever writes, "Bartleby forces the narrator to forego the biography's promise of

fullness and satisfaction and to emphasize instead its limitations" (de Boever 2006, 146-147). At the end of the story, Bartleby remains an enigma, having lived a life that eludes the written word.

Bartleby's white sheet – "the writing tablet on which nothing is written" – "functions precisely to represent the mode in which pure potentiality exists" according to Agamben (Agamben 1999a, 245). "An experience of potentiality as such is possible only if potentiality is always also potential not to (do or think something), if the writing table is capable of not being written on," he explains (ibid., 250). Thus, if human existence is the existence of potentiality, human life cannot be biographic in form: the life that we live exceeds life's events, the mere facts. Put another way, our life is never simply "as it is," but always already and additionally "as it is not."

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben describes this split between the "as" and the "as not:" "Under the 'as not,' life cannot coincide with itself and is divided into a life that we live (*vitam qua vivimus*, the set of facts and events that define our biography) and a life for which and in which we live (*vita qua vivimus*, what renders life livable and gives it a meaning and a form)" (Agamben 2011a, 248-249). To heal this split in our existence, we must slough off the biography that burdens us and embrace the "as not," live life in its "absolute contingency" rather than as an irrevocable event. "Inoperativity" is the term that Agamben uses for this "unworking" of our destinies, for this "unwriting" of our biographies (de la Durantaye 2009, 7). It is a retreat from action to contemplation and from actuality to potentiality. It is also, according to Agamben, a retreat from life as it is represented to life as it is truly lived: "The life, which contemplates its (own) power to act, renders itself inoperative in all its operations, and lives only (its) livability … In this inoperativity, the life that we live is only the life through which we live" (Agamben 2011a, 251).

Form-of-Life

The difficulty with Agamben's conception of human potentiality as "absolute contingency," however, is how it could possibly give human life a coherent and recognizable form. He attempts to solve this problem with his idea of "form-of-life." As he defines it in one of his essays, "form-of-life" is a life "in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life" (Agamben 2000, 4). It is potentiality as practice.

The crucial term in this operation is habit. As Agamben explains, "If being is divided into potential and act, something will in fact be needed to render possible, regulate and operate the passage from the one to the other. This element," he continues, "which defines and articulates the passage of potential from the merely generic (the potential according to which we say that the child can learn to write or play the flute) to the effective potential of one who already knows how to play the flute and can therefore put it in action is *hexis*, the habit… of potential" (Agamben 2013b, 92-93). Habit, which corresponds to "existing" rather than to simply "generic" potentiality, is a much tamer thing than "absolute contingency:" it refers to limited and specific powers of acting or not acting.

What is important about habit – as with all forms of "existing" potential – is its essential connection to the potentiality not to act. As Agamben observes: "In order that a distinction between habit and being-at-work be maintained, in order that *hexis* not always already blindly cross over into *energeia*, it is in fact necessary that the one who has the habit of a technique or of a knowledge be able not to exercise it, be able not to pass to the act" (Agamben 2016, 59). A habit is a routine, a pattern, a custom, an inclination, a leaning, a bent, or a preference. It is a tendency for a certain kind of behavior that may or may not be acted out in any given instance. It is not an

instinct, an impulse, a reflex, or a need – something that cannot *not* find expression. When Agamben writes that "no matter how customary, repeated, and socially compulsory, ["form-of-life"] always retains the character of a possibility," this is due to its habitual form (Agamben 2000, 4).

Form-of-life, then, is habitual life. Habit gives life a general character and a regular form that is ultimately derived from potentiality. It is a way of living contingent not upon facts but upon the existing potential to act or not to act. "It is only a manner of being and living," Agamben writes, "which does not in any way determine the living thing, just as it is in no way determined by it and is nonetheless inseparable from it" (Agamben 2016, 224). Habit gives life a regular form but does not determine one's life: there is always the possibility of breaking out of habitual patterns.

The other crucial aspect of habitual life is that it may serve as the basis for communal life. "What is decisive," writes Agamben, is that form-of-life "is a *koinos bios*, a common life" (Agamben 2013a, 58). This is because habits, according to Agamben, are not necessarily idiosyncratic or individual but on the contrary may exhibit one's belonging to a community. Agamben's "form-of-life," with its disregard for concrete facts and individual circumstances, is not about the lives that individuals live except insofar as they exemplify the potentiality of being human.

The clearest illustration of such a communal form-of-life is, of course, monastic life, to which Agamben's book, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, is devoted. "[T]he decisive core of the monastic condition," as he states in this book, "is not a substance or content, but a *habitus* or a form" (Agamben 2013a, 57). The form-of-life invented by the Christian monastic orders – the Franciscans, according to Agamben, above all – was a way of being that

proved itself not through acts of obedience but through simple, habitual living – "a living that in following the life of Christ gives itself and makes itself a form" (ibid., 105). What mattered to the monastic orders was not to repeat the acts of Christ, nor to obey the word of Christ, so much as to live life in a Christ-like manner, to realize the potential of the human being to live a Christian life.

This example allows us to illustrate what an individual life means in terms of form-of-life. From the perspective of form-of-life, "the life of Christ" does not refer to the events that marked Christ's life. It is not concerned with a reconstruction and representation of Christ's historical existence. Instead, it refers to the life of Christ as a paradigm of the Christian way of living. It is about living life from day to day in a Christ-like manner through the cultivation of Christian habits. In this way, "the life of Christ" has very little to do with the man himself. It is a common way of life, of which each and every Christian should aspire to be an example. It is about the potentiality of living a Christian life rather than the actual life and times of the historical person named Jesus Christ.

Indeed, what else could it mean to live a Christian life? This idea cannot be limited to the events of the life of Jesus: it does not mean to have been born two thousand years ago in the Levant, to have appointed twelve apostles, to have partaken of The Last Supper, or to have been crucified. It does not even mean to be the Son of God. All it means is to live life after the manner of Jesus Christ.

Form-of-life, therefore, is the writing of a life lived in common, of a habitual *ethos*. Individual lives are defined not by the events of their lives but as paradigms of a form-of-life. Only with this orientation towards life, Agamben argues, can we rescue "individual biography from its idiocy" and wrest human potentiality free from the burden of facticity (Agamben 2016, xxi).

Critical Remarks

With his conception of form-of-life, Agamben attempts to "square the circle," so to speak. Having exposed the gap between life and language with his idea of "infancy," and having argued that human beings exist in the mode of potentiality rather than actuality, with the notion of form-of-life, he tries to formulate a practical way of life that has its basis in potentiality. However, it seems to me that Agamben cannot have it both ways, and his efforts encounter difficulties at every step.

The first problem has to do with the relationship between "infancy" and "potentiality." Although Agamben argues that "existing" rather than "generic" potentiality is what proves the existence of potentiality and in doing so demonstrates the "impotential" essence of human beings, "infancy" is patently "generic." It concerns a child who does not yet speak but who will soon learn. Not only that, but when Agamben gives examples of generic potentiality he always cites children.[17] The unfortunate result of this equivocation between "generic" and "existing" potential as Agamben makes the transition from "infancy" to "potentiality" is that it renders his argument in *Remnants of Auschwitz* unconvincing: his claim that the *Muselmann*'s "infancy" proves the impossibility of dehumanization is at best a moot point if infancy is a form of "generic" potential. As Agamben says himself, the concept of potentiality as such is illusory if it refers only to generic cases.

[17] In addition to the example found on page 91 above, here are other instances: "There is a generic potentiality, and this is the one that is meant when we say, for example, that a child has the potential to know, or that he or she can potentially become the head of State" (Agamben 1999a, 179); and, revealingly, "If potential were always and only generic potential, such as the purely chimerical potential that belongs to a baby… then the concept of potential would dissolve" (Agamben 2016, 59).

The second problem concerns Agamben's attempt to "square the circle" with "form-of-life." The problem here is the opposite of the one above: if "infancy" proves to be illusory, a life of habit is too mundane. While Agamben may be correct that habits are different from actions in that habits may exist whether or not we actually perform them, this needs qualification: for a habit to merit the name, we have to perform it more often than not. Habits are predictable, recurring acts. Something done once or twice hardly merits the name of "habit." In other words, habit reifies the things we say and do, and such reification hardly gives us much cause to wonder at the "potentiality" of human life. As with "infancy," "form-of-life" is "potentiality" only in the abstract.

The third and final problem is that "form-of-life" is an inadequate alternative to "bare life." "Bare life" is the result of a philosophy that defines humanity as *logos* and forgets that the human is also a living being. "Form-of-life," on the other hand, is the result of a philosophy that defines humanity as "potentiality" and disregards the factual circumstances of individual living beings. For Agamben, it does not matter what we do or who we are; only our abstract potentiality matters. This, it seems to me, hardly does justice to those who have been exposed to biopolitical violence. It may salvage their humanity in a generic, abstract way, but it fails to honor what they experienced.

Conclusion

Nonetheless, I think that in at least one crucial respect, Agamben's formulation of humanity as "potentiality" represents a significant advance over Arendt's notion of human "biographability." Though Agamben goes too far when he asks us to dissociate ourselves from what we have done and who we have become – when he asks us to cast aside our biography – he is right that we should not derive our humanity from our individual identity. Human is "what" we are, not "who" we are.

This means that we should disentangle questions of humanity from questions of identity. The problem is that Agamben does not consistently do this. On the question of humanity, he rightly insists that it is not our individual identity – our biography – that makes us human. But on the question of identity, he falsely argues that because we are human beings, we have no identity. It may be true that, as human beings, we always reserve the potential "not to," but I would not agree, for instance, that this somehow makes what actually happens reversible or otherwise unreal. That things could have been otherwise seems to me like an idle speculation: we are who we are. This fact may not make us human, but it does give our life a practical form that "form-of-life" cannot but fail to provide. Agamben's attempt to "square the circle" cannot succeed because "potentiality" – even "existing potentiality" – cannot capture the contours of life as it is actually lived.

One of the interesting things about Agamben's "unwriting" of biography is that it demonstrates Arendt's notion of "biographability," albeit in negative fashion. First, Agamben asks us to disavow what we have done. Then he asks us to dissociate from who we are. He does this to reveal the core of our humanity that remains when we have stripped these layers of identity away. But in doing so, he reinforces Arendt's point that it is what we do that makes us who we are.

Thus, I see no reason to discard this aspect of Arendt's thesis; to the contrary, it seems more plausible than ever. However, Agamben has taught us the important lesson that human is "what" we are, not "who" we are, and vice versa. We need to disentangle humanity and identity. In the next chapter, I will heed this lesson by proceeding according to a new methodology. Leaving behind Arendt's phenomenology, which relies on a thick description of the human condition, I will turn to Michel Foucault, who allows us to pursue the question of identity as a question of discourse.

3 – To Err Is Human: Biography versus Biopolitics in Michel Foucault

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Agamben's metaphysics of human "potentiality" demonstrates to us that we should treat our humanity and our identity as two separate things. This requires us to reassess Arendt's thesis that "biographability" makes us "specifically human." In light of Agamben's work, I suggest that although our biography indeed makes us "who" we are, it does not make us human. We are already human; there is no need for us to "prove" it or "become" human.

Disentangling our identity from our humanity in this way comes with consequences. Foremost among them is that "identity" becomes denatured. We may no longer appeal to a thick description of the human condition or insights into human nature for the roots of our identity. We have to treat identity as an "artifact" – a product of social and political relations – not as a natural object.

This suggests to us that we need an alternative to Arendt's "phenomenological humanism" (Hinchman and Hinchman 1984). We need to pursue the question of identity in a way that is agnostic about human nature and that understands identity as a denatured artifact. In this chapter, I propose that Michel Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge" and "genealogy of power" fits this task.

While Foucault admits that his methodological approach does not "replace" or "exclude" phenomenology, all the same he declares that his aim is "to free history from the grip of phenomenology" and its basis in the "lived experience" of subjects (Foucault 2010, 108, 200, 203). From his archaeological/genealogical perspective, all "lived experience" is determined by the rules of discourse and positioned in a dynamic field of power relations. That is to say, how we

experience the world is determined by what we are able to know about it, and this in turn is contingent upon the historically specific context in which we live. Thus, from this perspective, Arendt's notions of "the human condition" and a "specifically human" form of existence seem naïve.

This contrast is not just methodological: it points to two very different ideas of biography. From Arendt's "phenomenological humanist" perspective, the basis of biography is the appearance of human beings as actors whose deeds may be recorded as they were witnessed. But from Foucault's archaeological/genealogical perspective, biographies are the artifacts of archives, produced in accordance with the discursive practices and power relations of a particular historical period. For him, biographies are not simply impressions *of* life; they impress *upon* life. How individuals are categorized according to the prevailing forms of knowledge, and where they are positioned in a field of power, are the most powerful determinants of how their life story will be told.

In other words, for Foucault, our identity is an artifact of discourse, not a natural object. "Who" we are is not simply what we do, as if that were plain for all to see, but in addition how what we do is understood. This complication introduces a second-order politics of biography. If the first-order politics of biography is the fact that our identity is defined by our actions, the second-order politics of biography is the fact that our actions may be conceived in different ways. From Foucault's archaeological/genealogical perspective, this latter point of contention is not a neutral, disinterested question but a political struggle in which the lives and identities of individuals are at stake.

This chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, I argue that the origins of Foucault's archaeological/genealogical method lie in the French tradition of the history of science.

In particular, Foucault was influenced by his mentor, Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995), a philosopher and historian of science whose "history of the concept" inspired Foucault's archaeology. At that time, Foucault recalls, there was a "dividing line" between the history of science and the phenomenological theory of the subject (Foucault 1998, 466). Phenomenologists posited "lived experience" as the basis of knowledge, while historians of science contended vice versa.

In the second section, I contend that Canguilhem is also the inspiration for Foucault's account of subjectivity. Despite his opposition to phenomenology and existentialism, Foucault cannot do entirely without a theory of the subject, and his later writings in particular evince an interest in self-cultivation and individual ethics. The difficulty is to reconcile this interest with his rigorously non-subjective and anti-humanist archaeological/genealogical method. But I argue that Canguilhem's biological-epistemological notion of "error" supplies Foucault with the account of subjective self-formation that he needs. According to Canguilhem, human evolution has led to an "erroneous" relation with our environment. Our access to our environment is mediated by concepts, and individual human beings must go through an endless process of trial and error to adapt.

In the final section, I illustrate how Foucault adopts Canguilhem's notion of "error" through a reading of two biographical dossiers that Foucault edited, both concerning obscure nineteenth-century Frenchmen. One was a villager who murdered his mother and was thought to be insane, and the other was a hermaphrodite raised in a nunnery but later identified as a man. These dossiers show how these "abnormal" individuals challenged the official account of their lives with their own account. In doing so, these dossiers stage the second-order politics of biography: they reveal how the same event, conceived in multiple ways, produces multiple stories.

From a History of the Concept to an Archaeology of Knowledge and a Genealogy of Power

Situating Foucault's Archaeology

Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics is the title of perhaps the most influential book written about Foucault (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). It is a good title because it indicates the careful route Foucault's "archaeology" charts between the Scylla of structuralism and the Charybdis of hermeneutics. This intellectual map helps greatly to clarify what archaeology is not.

First, unlike structuralism, archaeology is not the pursuit of "cross-cultural, ahistorical, abstract laws defining the total space of possible permutations of meaningless elements" (ibid., 55). Archaeology "only claims to be able to find the local, changing rules which at a given period in a particular discursive formation define what counts as an identical meaningful statement" (ibid.).

Second, it is not the attempt "to understand *utterances* on the basis of a common background of meaning," which defines the hermeneutic approach (ibid., 53). To the contrary, archaeology "isolates and indicates the arbitrariness of the hermeneutic horizon of meaning" through analyzing the historically specific rules for the production of meaningful statements (ibid., 106).

Hence, archaeology establishes itself as a "third way" in response to a problem that all three try to solve: the Kantian split between man as transcendental subject and empirical object.[18] This split is still basic in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which was so influential for the generation of philosophers preceding Foucault, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and

[18] Foucault presents this dilemma in the ninth chapter of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, "Man and His Doubles" (Foucault 1994b; see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 30-43).

Sartre. Structuralism, hermeneutics, and archaeology are all attempts to move past Husserlian phenomenology, which posits a transcendental ego that gives meaning to the world.[19] Each strives to undermine the subjective constitution of meaning through "lived experience." Thus, while it is important to note that archaeology presents itself as an alternative to structuralism and hermeneutics, it is crucial to remember that it, just like them, is a rejection of phenomenology. Above all, Foucault's archaeology targets a philosophy that posits "man" as a transcendental subject.

Foucault's anti-phenomenological position, with its historically oriented "empiricalism," is the result of his training in the French tradition of the history and philosophy of science.[20] In what was to be one of his final essays before his death, "Life: Experience and Science" – later adapted as an introduction to Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological* (Canguilhem 1991) – Foucault aligns himself with this tradition, which runs from Jean Cavaillès, Gaston Bachelard, and Alexandre Koyré to Canguillhem, a lineage he separates from that of the great French phenomenologists, which he traces from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to at least as far back as Henri Bergson (Foucault 1998, 466).[21] He submits that the "dividing line" between the history of science – a "philosophy of knowledge, of rationality, and of the concept" – and phenomenology – "a

[19] For an introduction, see Husserl's last (unfinished) work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Husserl 1970).

[20] The term "empiricalism" – distinct from "empiricism" – is Colin Koopman's (Koopman 2015, 572). The distinction is important: while empiricism posits that all knowledge comes from experience, empiricalism merely denotes "an attention to detail and fact" (ibid.). Were Foucault to embrace the former, he would contradict himself, but he is free to adopt the latter as a scholarly scruple.

[21] For an overview of several of these figures in the French tradition of the history of science, see Hans-Jörg Rheinberger 2010. It is worth noting that Rheinberger agrees with Foucault's history of French intellectual trends and includes Foucault among the "conceptualist" historians of science (ibid., 25). See Hyder 2003 and Thompson 2008 for more on Foucault's relation to the history of science.

philosophy of experience, of meaning, of the subject" – was at least as important for mid-twentieth-century French philosophy as louder and more obvious cleavages over Marxism and Freudianism (ibid.).[22]

This divide became apparent with the reception of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, originally given as lectures in Paris at the Sorbonne in February 1929. While Sartre, the phenomenologist, sought to "radicalize Husserl in the direction of a philosophy of the subject" – that is, towards existentialism – Cavaillès, the historian of science, urged a return to epistemology and "the founding problems of Husserl's thought, the problems of formalism and intuitionalism" (ibid.). Foucault recognizes in this latter approach the essential Kantian question: What are the conditions of possibility for knowledge? However, by locating these conditions historically rather than transcendentally, the history of science and Foucault's "archaeology" radically reorient this inquiry.[23]

Foucault's personal connection to the history of science was Georges Canguilhem, who in 1960 agreed to sponsor his doctoral thesis – what was eventually published in abridged form as *Madness and Civilization* (Foucault 1988b).[24] But it is Foucault's second major book, *The Birth*

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[22] See as well Gérard Raulet's 1983 interview with Foucault, "Structuralism and post-structuralism" (Foucault 1998, 433-458).

[23] As Colin Koopman and Tomas Matza write, "we understand [Foucault's] orientation as a historicized form of Kantian inquiry into the conditions of possibility that enframe subjects capable of acting and objects capable of being acted upon" (Koopman and Matza 2013, 826). See also "What Is Enlightenment?" in Foucault 1997, 303-319 and Jürgen Habermas in Hoy, ed. 1986, 103-108.

[24] No small favor, since the manuscript was nearly a thousand pages long and had already been written, not to mention that Foucault refused to make any changes! On the early days of this relationship, which were not especially warm, see Didier Eribon's biography of Foucault (Eribon 1991, 101-105). Writing more generally of Canguilhem's influence on Foucault's generation, Eribon describes Canguilhem as a "rallying point:" "His name became something of a militant password for all those who were trying to escape the well-trod paths of a philosophy of the subject – that is, for all those who, from the 1950s until the 1980s, attempted to inject new life into the theoretical discourse of philosophy, sociology, or psychoanalysis," he says (ibid., 104). See also

of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception (Foucault 1994a) – published in 1963 in a series on the history and philosophy of biology and medicine edited by Canguilhem – that really shows the influence of Canguilhem's "history of the concept" on his thought (Gutting 1989, 112). Indeed, as Gary Gutting argues, Foucault's "primary accomplishment" in *The Birth of the Clinic* is to have written "a history of the formation of the modern concept of disease" using Canguilhem's method (ibid.).

The History of the Concept

Canguilhem's "history of the concept" distinguishes itself from typical intellectual history through what it is not: it is not "the history of terms, the history of phenomena, or even the history of theories" (ibid., 32). From its perspective, a history of terms is superficial because it draws connections between thinkers who use the same term regardless if they refer to the same concept; a history of phenomena proceeds in the wrong direction because what matters is not the phenomena observed but the manner of its observation; and a history of theories is too grandiose to explain either minor conceptual revisions over time or the fact that concepts are "theoretically polyvalent" – i.e., that the same concept might be deployed in different or even opposed theories (ibid., 32-34).[25]

Perhaps the best illustration of Canguilhem's "history of the concept" is his book on the concept of the reflex, *La formation du concept de reflex aux XVII^e^ et XVIII^e^ siècles* (Canguilhem

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Gary Gutting's *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since the 1960s* (Gutting 2011, 12, 34).

[25] Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Foucualt 1994b) exemplifies these criticisms of typical intellectual history. This history of "epistemes" from the Renaissance to the Modern Era is critical of those who would equate the use of the term "evolution" in Lamarck and Darwin, as well as those who think "man" existed before the modern age, all while attempting to show that theories of life, labor, and language in each "episteme" share an epistemology. For example, "representation" was the encompassing mode of Classical thought.

1977). In this book, he argues against the standard view that Descartes invented this concept, which refers to "movements that occur independently of the organ of central control" such as the heart or the brain (Gutting 1989, 35). Descartes' mechanistic theory of physiology could admit no such decentered concept of "reflex," and thus his use of the term cannot be identified with contemporary usage. Instead, Canguilhem attributes the discovery of the concept to a seventeenth-century English physician, Thomas Willis, who developed a non-mechanistic physiology (ibid., 35-37).

Similarly, in *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault attributes the modern concept of disease to Marie-François-Xavier Bichat (1771-1802), who approached pathological anatomy from the notion that disease is not something that "invades" or "attacks" the body from the outside but is a "specific form of life itself" (Foucault 1994a, 131). This new conception of disease, in which "[t]he entire reality and meaning of disease resides in its specific bodily sites," in turn led to the rise of an "anatomo-clinical" medicine that placed its focus on individual case histories (ibid., 132).

Differences between the "History of the Concept" and Foucault's "Archaeology of Knowledge"

However, Foucault's own method of historical research, detailed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, distinguishes itself in several respects from Canguilhem's "history of the concept." The first and most obvious difference is that Foucault focuses on the "dubious" human sciences, such as psychiatry, medicine, penology, and economics, rather than the "noble" natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, or even Canguilhem's own specialty, the life sciences (Gutting 1989, 255).

Foucault's focus on these "immature sciences" necessitates a new approach (Hacking 1979): unlike Canguilhem, Foucault cannot presume the normative status of the sciences he

studies, and so must provide the history of how these disciplines came to be formed in the first place. "Here," Gary Gutting claims, "we find what is no doubt the most fundamental way in which Foucault moves beyond the approach of Bachelard and Canguilhem. For him," Gutting continues, "the norms found in (purportedly) scientific disciplines are not unquestioned givens for historical reflection but themselves the outcomes of contingent historical processes" (Gutting 1989, 254-255).

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault describes the work of Bachelard and Canguilhem as an "epistemological history of the sciences," "situated at the threshold of scientificity," in contrast to his "archaeological history," which "takes as its point of attack the threshold of epistemologization" (Foucault 2010, 190). The "threshold of epistemologization" is the lowest threshold of discursive formation, at which norms for judging the coherence and validity of statements are established. Before becoming a science, a discursive formation must pass through the "threshold of positivity," at which point it becomes a self-governing system for the production of statements, only reaching "scientificity" upon developing rigorous and precise rules within this system (Gutting 1989, 252-253). Hence, we can see that, in contrast to his predecessors, Foucault is interested in the epistemological formation of discourse at the most basic, pre-scientific level.

This means that Foucault's archaeology has a considerably wider scope than the history of science because, "from an archaeological view, a science is just one, localized formation in the 'epistemological site' that is a discursive formation" (ibid., 252). Due to his focus on the human sciences, Foucault comes to a methodological position that may no longer be properly contained within the history of science. Instead, archaeology is the history of the formation of discourse as such.

The Rules of Discursive Formation

Foucault organizes the rules of discursive formation into four types: rules for the formation of objects, rules concerning "enunciative modalities," rules for the formation of concepts, and rules for the formation of strategies (Foucault 2010, 40-70 [chapters 3-6]; cf. Gutting 1989, 234-237). The first type covers "[t]he conditions necessary for the appearance of an object of discourse, the historical conditions required if one is to 'say anything' about it" (Foucault 2010, 44). This includes rules for the transference of objects from their original context to the specialized domain of a particular discursive formation (such as procedures for taking a "problem" child out of the classroom and to the counselor's office), rules for who has the authority to make such decisions, and finally rules for ad-hoc diagnosis (such as the criterion for obscenity, "I know it when I see it").

The second type covers rules about who has the right to speak within a discursive formation (lawyers, for example, cannot swap roles with doctors, and laymen may substitute for neither) and, by extension, which institutions may legitimately make statements about an object. Additionally, rules concerning "enunciative modalities" specify the various positions a subject may take – whether their job is to speak, listen, or simply observe. Foucault argues that subjectivity is dispersed in various such poses, resisting "the unifying function of *a* subject" as posited by Husserlian phenomenology (ibid., 54-55). For him, subjects are the products of discourse, not vice versa.

The third type covers logical and methodological rules governing the order of statements, rules for the acceptance or rejection of certain kinds of statements (rules for evaluation), and "*procedures of intervention*" including "*techniques of rewriting*," "*methods of transcribing*," "*modes of translating*," and "methods of *systematizing*" statements to meet specific standards

(ibid., 58-59). Here we can see the clear influence of Canguilhem's "history of the concept," which closely tracks how concepts change form or become incorporated into new theories as sciences evolve.

Finally, the fourth type covers "strategic" rules for the development of theories or themes within a discursive formation. These strategies form around "the various *points of diffraction* found in a given discursive formation" (Gutting 1989, 237). These points of diffraction occur when two or more incompatible but equally valid statements emerge within a discourse. Which points of diffraction emerge in the first place (among the many possible ones), as well as which strategy is selected, has to do with both "the *economy of the discursive constellation*" – that is, to what extent a given strategy has resources at its disposal – and the decisions of authorities (though again, as subjects "positioned" in a discursive field, not as intentional subjects) (Foucault 2010, 66-70).

This last type brings us to the very edge of archaeological analysis, as it gestures beyond discourse to "*a field of non-discursive practices*" that Foucault is not able to adequately analyze until he develops a "genealogy of power" to complement his "archaeology of knowledge" (ibid., 68).[26]

[26] Although Dreyfus and Rabinow and Gutting disagree about the successes and failures of Foucault's archaeological method (compare chapter 4 in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, tellingly entitled "The Methodological Failure of Archaeology," with chapter 7 of Gutting 1989), both see genealogy as a complement rather than a replacement of archaeology. The former emphasize that "*[t]here is no pre- and post-archaeology or genealogy in Foucault*" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 104) while the latter writes that "genealogy does not replace or even seriously revise Foucault's archaeological method. It rather combines it with a complementary technique of causal analysis" (Gutting 1989, 271). Arnold I. Davidson, for his part, agrees with Gutting (Hoy, ed. 1986, 221-234).

Foucault's Nietzschean Turn: Genealogy

If it requires careful analysis to show Canguilhem's influence on Foucault's "archaeology," no such subtlety is needed to show that Nietzsche inspires Foucault's "genealogy." The concept is unmistakably borrowed from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 1998). Indeed, Foucault's main exposition of the method is an essay on this book entitled "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (Foucault 1998, 369-391).[27] But this essay is strictly an exegesis of Nietzsche, which leaves readers with the task of surmising the differences between these two authors.

One of these readers, Gary Gutting, has provided us with a number of helpful guidelines. To begin with, he notes that Foucault is strongly attracted to Nietzsche's "genealogy" for two main reasons: first, because genealogy undermines the thesis of the historical progress of human consciousness "by showing how the allegedly liberating ideal of objective self-knowledge is in fact a subtle instrument of domination;" and second, because it reveals "our most revered institutions and practices as 'human, all-too-human'" (Gutting 1990, 337). In like-minded fashion, Foucault will argue that the history of human thought is insidious, haphazard, and riven by petty struggles.

However, Foucault disagrees with some of the particulars of Nietzsche's thought, such as his "psychologism" and his grandiose notion of "the will to power." Additionally, Gutting finds "no reason to think (as Habermas and others have suggested) that Foucault accepts the strong epistemological relativism that can be read into some of Nietzsche's formulations" (ibid.).

[27] Although Jacqueline Stevens claims Foucault misunderstood Nietzsche. She writes: "Genealogy simply is not the important conceptual conceit for Nietzsche later scholars [such as Foucault] claim it to be. 'Genealogie' is deployed in *On the Genealogy* as a stylistic rebuke specific to Nietzsche's dismissal of [his friend, Paul] Rée[,] and nothing more" (Stevens 2003, 578).

Foucault, informed by his own archaeological method, develops a sophisticated genealogy wherein neither knowledge nor power may be reduced to each other. This means that truth, while certainly influenced by power relations, is never just a "façade" or a tool of power, and that power, while linked to discourse, is not exhausted in our will to know. Power and knowledge are distinct social forces.

With these guidelines in mind, allow us to briefly go through Foucault's essay on Nietzsche's genealogy, highlighting themes that seem relevant to Foucault's own genealogical work. First, like Foucault's archaeology, Nietzsche's genealogy "opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (Foucault 1998, 370). In doing so, it subverts traditional history in three significant ways: it asserts that history is a chance process, a series of accidents, rather than something logical; it asserts that "historical beginnings are lowly" and impure; and it asserts that truth is "the history of an error," "hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history" (ibid., 372-373).

Second, also like Foucault's archaeology, Nietzsche's genealogy derides subjectivity. "Where the soul pretends unification or the Me fabricates a coherent identity," Foucault writes, "the genealogist sets out to study the beginning – numberless beginnings" of this supposed unity (ibid., 374). To the genealogist, we subjects are but the latest accidents of history. This history is "inscribed" onto our very own bodies, insidiously influencing how we view ourselves and how we act.[28]

[28] This idea, of course, is something Foucault takes very seriously in his genealogical works, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, which show how modern forms of discipline, based on the sciences of penology and sexuality, respectively, constitute individuals as discursive subjects.

Third – and this is where genealogy really goes beyond archaeology – Nietzsche understands history as the product of forces. To him, history is a "hazardous play of dominations" (ibid., 376). Furthermore, "no one is responsible" for what happens because no force is decisive, and there is no one behind the curtain who directs this "single drama" in its "endlessly repeated play" (ibid., 377). Here Foucault finds a theory of power with no center and no subject that adds drama and dynamism to the "non-discursive" field of relations to which his archaeology vaguely points.

Admittedly, this theory of power remains vague until Foucault details it in part four, chapter two of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, entitled "Method" (Foucault 1990a, 92-102). Here, he lists several "nominalistic" propositions about the nature of power:[29] first, power is not a property of agents but a "nonegalitarian and mobile" relation between them; second, power relations do not exist outside of or apart from other forms of relation (economic, scientific, sexual, etc.) but are immanent to these relations, affecting them and affected by them; third, "[p]ower comes from below" and circulates through society at large – "[m]ajor dominations" are but "the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations;" fourth, in Foucault's infamous phrase, "[p]ower relations are both intentional and nonsubjective" in that local tactics may be understood as the result of calculation but the global strategies that emerge from these tactical movements take shape without anyone at the helm; and fifth, almost as famously, Foucault declares, "Where there is power, there is resistance," by which he does not mean that resistance is something "outside" power, but rather that it is the necessary counterforce of power (ibid., 94-96).

[29] By "nominalistic," he means that "power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (ibid., 93). This, of course, is not a shocking move – as Ian Hacking has argued, "Foucault was a complete nominalist about things human" (Hacking 1985, 277).

The result is a theory where power is everywhere, but not everything; where it affects all other forms of relation, but also is reciprocally affected by them; and where global outcomes are the unintended consequences of the intended acts of local subjects. Foucault's "genealogy of power" is the study of the historical movement of this force field in its ever-shifting, open-ended play.[30]

This theory of power, which informs Foucault's later genealogical histories of modern "governmentality," does not discard or even really revise his archaeology of knowledge. Instead, it complements it: if archaeology pictures history in discrete frames called "epistemes," each defined by their unique conditions for the production of truth, genealogy reveals the complex dynamics of struggle that influence and are influenced by these epistemic frames. This does not mean that "truth" is really a tool of power, or that power is really the will to truth, but only that truth and power mutually influence each other in the unpredictable play of forces that is human history.

The products of this historical becoming – not the producers – are we subjects. Thus, Todd May is right to say that Canguilhem and Nietzsche inspire Foucault's "two-pronged" attack on phenomenology (Gutting, ed. 2005, 302): by sharpening their techniques, he punctures the subject. Our "lived experience" is shaped by the "history of an error" that we call truth (Foucault 1998, 373).

[30] Perhaps the clearest example of how Foucault applies this method to actual historical developments is the edited volume of his lectures given at the Collège de France in 1975-1976, entitled "Society Must Be Defended." Here he shows how the counterrevolutionary, aristocratic idea of a "race war" – a local tactic – eventually mutated into the strategy of the revolutionary French state: the protection of the national race against other states and the degenerate members of its own population (Foucault 2003b). Foucault continues this genealogy of the modern "biopolitical" state in his 1977-1978 lecture course, "Security, Territory, Population" (Foucault 2007).

Life Is Error: Foucault and Canguilhem on the Historical Adventure of Human Knowledge

Yet, despite Foucault's relentless critique of phenomenology, it still seems that in some vital sense he remains a "philosopher of experience." Both Thomas Lemke (Lemke 2011) and Gary Gutting (Gutting 2002) have noted this, as have Foucault's interviewers, such as Duccio Trombadori (Foucault 2000, 239-297) and Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Foucault 1997, 253-280).

Trombadori, especially, presses Foucault on this subject. When Foucault confesses that Georges Bataille, Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Blanchot, and Pierre Klossowski fascinated him during his university days because they were all concerned with the problem of "personal experience," Trombadori interjects: "but all phenomenological thought is centered on the problem of experience and depends on it for tracing its own theoretical horizon. What sets you apart from it, then?" (Foucault 2000, 241). Foucault answers that while phenomenology is only interested in everyday experience, the authors he mentioned wrote of experience as "trying to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable'" – that is, an experience of transgression (ibid.). Indeed, this apparent obsession with "limit-experiences" has sometimes been taken to be the key to interpreting Foucault's work, as for instance in James Miller's biography (Miller 1993).

But, as Gary Gutting observes, this answer (both Miller's and Foucault's own) is unsatisfying because Foucault's work is precisely about the mundane – the regularities that govern discursive practice and the relations of power that pervade society (Gutting 2002, 78). Even his notorious description of the 1757 torture and execution of Robert-François Damiens, which graces the opening pages of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1995, 3-5), simply serves to exemplify the method of punishment of that era. No one who was there thought that it was anything out of the ordinary.

Those from another era – us – however, do. This is what Thomas Lemke means when he calls Foucault's books "experience-books:" the historical events they describe, while mundane to the participants, have a shocking effect on Foucault's readers that brings us to the limit of what we think we know – conceptually and experientially – about the world we live in (Lemke 2011, 32). The point, for Foucault, is to "problematize" our present historical "episteme," so as to change it (ibid.).

Lemke is undoubtedly correct in his understanding of the purpose of Foucault's books. The transformation of *The History of Sexuality* over its three published volumes, from a genealogy of modern sexuality in the first volume to a description of sexual ethics in the ancient world in the second and third, illustrates how the genealogical "problematization" of present forms of knowledge and strategies of power leads to ethical "experimentation" (Foucault 1988a; 1990a; 1990b).

But when Dreyfus and Rabinow ask Foucault how this vision of ethics "without recourse to knowledge or universal rules" differs from Sartrean existentialism, his answer is not very persuasive. While he admits that Sartre "avoids the idea of the self as something given to us," he argues that "through the moral notion of authenticity, he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves – to be truly our true self" (Foucault 1997, 262). Foucault says instead that one must forget the notion of authenticity and embrace creativity, likening his position to Nietzsche's in *The Gay Science* §290, which exhorts individuals to fashion themselves as a work of art (Nietzsche 2001, 163-164). But does Sartre's existentialist credo – "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 1993, 31-62) – really differ that much from Nietzsche's notion of defining oneself through cultivating a style?

Indeed, Gary Gutting calls Foucault's proposed distinction an "amazing suggestion, since Sartre himself offers precisely this aesthetic model of self-making in his famous lecture 'Existentialism Is a Humanism'" (Gutting 2002, 85). Gutting concludes that with respect to Sartre, Foucault betrays "an uncharacteristic anxiety of influence," too eager to differentiate himself from the "master thinker" of the past generation (ibid., 84). Despite his protestations, Foucault remains committed to the existentialist idea of self-forming subjectivity. The question then becomes, how is it possible for Foucault to reconcile this idea of subjectivity with his archaeological/genealogical method?

Canguilhem's Concept of Error

I contend that understanding Foucauldian subjectivity as an adaptation of Canguilhem's biological-epistemological concept of 'error' best allows us to reconcile the notion of a self-forming subject with Foucault's anti-phenomenological archaeological and genealogical method. Canguilhem was led to this concept through his philosophical reflections on biology, which informs us that because "[a]n animal is formed by heredity so as to receive and transmit certain kinds of information … each species' structure determines its own particular environment" (Canguilhem 1994, 319). Take, for example, Jakob von Uexküll's description of a tick, a deaf, blind insect whose whole world is limited to three sources of stimuli: "(1) the odor of butyric acid contained in the sweat of all mammals; (2) the temperature of thirty-seven degrees corresponding to that of the blood of mammals; (3) the typology of skin characteristic of mammals" (Agamben 2004, 46). Nothing else matters to a tick; these are the horizons of its experience of the world. But if heredity determines what organisms can know, Canguilhem asks, how do we explain the history of human knowledge, with all its revolutions? His answer is that a genetic "error" has occurred, that "man became what he is by mutation, by an error of heredity" that spurs him on to

"an anxious quest for the greatest possible quantity and variety of information" (Canguilhem 1994, 319).

Hence, according to Canguilhem, the history of human knowledge has its origins in the genetic coding process. He speculates that "human error is probably one with human errancy;" that life itself "by error ha[s] produced a living thing capable of making errors" (ibid.). But there is more to "error" than heredity. There is a difference in kind between the error that life itself makes in the genetic coding process and the subsequent series of errors made by "a living thing capable of making errors." The first kind is hereditary; the second is conceptual. Furthermore, the first kind does not necessarily lead to the second: it would be hard to imagine, for instance, that a hereditary error would transform the tick described above into "a living thing capable of making errors." In fact, this phrase is merely another name for "[h]uman specificity" (ibid., 17). Canguilhem's argument is that "human error" – our ever-fluctuating and endlessly frustrating attempt to grasp reality through concepts – is the consequence of "human errancy" – a genetic mutation that has left us with a radically undetermined relationship to our environment. This mutation forces us to structure our environment in our own terms, a process that is highly prone to "error."

The crucial – and provocative – implication of Canguilhem's concept of "error" is that, as Leonard Lawlor puts it, it means "the concept is immanent *in* – 'dans' – life" (Lawlor 2005, 417). Contrary to phenomenological critiques of the lifelessness of the *cogito*, for Canguilhem "[t]he fact that man lives in a conceptually structured environment does not prove that he has turned away from life … just that he lives in a certain way" (Foucault 1998, 475). Knowledge is not something separate from life, and knowing is not an activity different from or alien to living. The same goes for "error:" it is not a product of alienation and distance from life, but part of the life process.

Canguilhem claims that knowing – and thereby erring – is the specifically human way of living life.

In doing so, Canguilhem inverts the phenomenological theory of the subject. His account of human development means that subjectivity is first and foremost the result of biological-epistemological formation; that "lived experience" comes second. "Canguilhem," as Paul Rabinow notes, "is unequivocal on this point: the first level of life, form, controls the second, experience" (Canguilhem 1994, 18). This is true for all organisms, but particularly problematic for human beings because they have to struggle to structure and interpret their environment through the mediation of concepts. Canguilhem captures this struggle in what Rabinow calls his "not-so-latent existentialism:" "His individual is condemned to adapt to an environment and to act using concepts and tools that have no preestablished affinities with his surrounding world. 'Life,'" he writes, quoting Canguilhem, "'becomes a wily, supple intelligence of the world'" (ibid., 18-19).[31]

This image of the individual human being as an epistemological nomad corresponds to Canguilhem's famous work on normativity in a fascinating way. As Paul Rabinow explains, Canguilhem defines normality as "the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to variable and varying environments" (ibid., 16). Because this ability varies from organism to organism, normality is not a statistical regularity but an individual's state of being. This leads Canguilhem to conclude that "[t]here is no objective pathology" (Canguilhem 1991, 226). According to him, "pathological" and "normal" refer entirely to the singularity of an individual organism's status. Jean Gayon notes the similarities between Canguilhem's understanding of the normal and the

[31] Here one can establish a parallel between Canguilhem and Nietzsche, who describes truth as "the kind of error without which a certain species [human beings] could not live" (Nietzsche 1968, #493).

pathological and his speculations concerning the identity of life and knowledge: Just as "normality" cannot be defined in abstraction but only in reference to the reality of the individual in question, "knowledge" is ultimately a question of the individual's biological makeup (Gayon 1998).

It is this consistent emphasis on the biological individual that lends Canguilhem's concept of "error" to a notion of subjectivity. Canguilhem's biological-epistemological "existentialism" emphasizes the individual human being in their struggle to adapt to their environment. But what is revolutionary about this "existentialism" is that it begins from knowledge, not lived experience. Individual subjectivities are the result of this identification of the will to know with the struggle to live.

Foucauldian Subjectivity as an Adaptation of Canguilhem's Concept of Error

Foucault recognizes the challenge Canguilhem's concept of "error" puts to phenomenology in his essay, "Life: Experience and Science." As detailed above, this is where Foucault draws a "dividing line" between a "philosophy of experience" and a "philosophy of knowledge" (Foucault 1998, 466). Having drawn this line, Foucault states that "[i]n opposition to this philosophy of meaning, the subject, and lived experience, Canguilhem has proposed a philosophy of error, of the concept of the living, as a different way of approaching the notion of life" (ibid., 477). This philosophy, he notes, upends the phenomenological "theory of the subject," "seeing that knowledge, rather than opening onto the truth of the world, is deeply rooted in the 'errors' of life" (ibid.).

More than that, Foucault seems to recognize the compatibility of Canguilhem's concept of "error" with his own archaeological/genealogical perspective. Speculating further on the idea, he writes: "The opposition of the true and the false, the values that are attributed to the one and the

other, the power effects that different societies and different institutions link to that division – all this may be nothing but the most belated response to that possibility of error inherent in life" (ibid., 476). While this passage is undoubtedly tentative, observe how Foucault takes Canguilhem's notion of "error" and adapts it easily to his own archaeological/genealogical perspective. While Canguilhem is silent about the role of "error" in the production of social reality, Foucault links it to the "power effects" that circulate within "different societies and different institutions." Indeed, there seems to be an elective affinity between Foucault's descriptions of strategic games of power-knowledge and the notion that knowledge is the contingent, "erroneous" product of the struggle to adapt.

Perhaps we may gauge the extent of Foucault's receptivity to Canguilhem's notion of "error" – and show what it has to offer as a complement to his archaeological method – by comparing his speculations in "Life: Experience and Science" with a much earlier statement from 1968 that he made in response to questions from Le Cercle Épistemologique [The Paris Epistemology Circle] published in the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (Foucault 1998, 297-333).[32] At the end of a discussion of the various illusions that plague the historical study of science, Foucault speaks of the "*illusion of experience*," the "supposition that science is grounded in the plenitude of a concrete and lived experience" (ibid., 331). But Foucault submits that the opposite view – that science is a "rupture" from everyday experience – is "equally illusory" (ibid.). Instead, what gives shape to both experience and science are the historically specific conditions for knowledge as such: "knowledge," he argues, "determines the space in which science and experience can be separated and situated in relation to the other" (ibid.). This means that human beings, prior to any science or experience, are always already living in a conceptually structured environment. But the

[32] For the full set of questions posed by this group to Foucault, see Hallward and Peden, eds. 2012.

lingering, unaddressed question is, how did this conceptually structured environment come to exist?

Canguilhem's notion of "erroneous" subjectivity goes a long way in answering this question, and it does so without contradicting Foucault's archaeological/genealogical method. Recall that for Canguilhem, knowing is a form of adapting – and thus a form of living – that is more primordial than our lived experience. Indeed, it makes experience possible. Furthermore, this identification of knowing with living and adapting means that the history of knowledge is discontinuous, full of reversals, reorientations, and innovations, as well as dead ends. This leaves Canguilhem's notion of "error" better able to explain the contingency of the history of epistemology than Foucault's archaeology, which can trace its contours but cannot account for it.[33] Finally, the form of subjectivity Canguilhem's notion of "error" suggests is neither the product of "consciousness" nor "intentionality" but rather an intimate, biological link between knowledge and life. This is not incompatible with Foucault's understanding of subjectivity as the product of one's position(s) in a discursive formation, and in addition it makes it possible to see how an individual subject could be "self-forming" – or adaptive – and not simply the product of discourse.

This, of course, does not prove that Foucault adapted Canguilhem's concept of "error." Nonetheless, I have provided several reasons it is a plausible argument in addition to several reasons it would be a productive one. Regarding the former, I have shown the extent of the influence of the history of science and particularly Canguilhem on Foucault's intellectual formation, from the roots of his archaeology in Canguilhem's "history of the concept" to his antipathy to phenomenology. Because Canguilhem offers a viable alternative to the

[33] Dreyfus and Rabinow emphasize that Foucault's archaeology is limited to description. Foucault is inconsistent when he uses it to *explain* the formation of discourses (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 83).

phenomenological theory of the subject – a fact that Foucault himself recognizes – it is plausible to submit that this alternative had an effect on Foucault's own ideas about subjectivity, however undeveloped. At the very least, Foucault seems to recognize that Canguilhem's concept of "error" could help explain the dynamic history of thought that Foucault's archaeology/genealogy tries to capture.

But even if Foucault was not, in fact, influenced by Canguilhem's concept of "error," there are still several reasons why it would be productive to understand Foucauldian subjectivity through this lens. First and foremost is that a theory of subjectivity derived from "error" is consistent with Foucault's anti-phenomenological position that knowledge is prior to experience. Moreover, it helps explain how our "conceptually structured environment" – or "episteme" – is formed in the first place, and how individuals are "self-forming" in their adaptation to this environment. This brings us to the second major reason the concept of "error" is productive for Foucault: it would make it possible to explain the contingent development of the history of thought instead of merely describing it. It would establish clearly what is at stake in games of power-knowledge: individual lives.[34]

In fact, this idea that 'life' is at stake in discursive practice is not at all foreign to the latter period of Foucault's career. Whether analyzing "biopolitics" or detailing "technologies of the self" to be deployed against modes of subjectivation, one gets the impression that, for the late Foucault, "life becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object" (Deleuze 1988,

[34] I share this assessment of the productive potential of the concept of "error" with Gary Gutting. He argues that "Canguilhem's error approach to knowledge allows Foucault to complete his alternative to the phenomenological conception of normal experience. While his archaeology reveals a conceptual background of experience that is independent of any transcendental subject," he continues, "it does not explain how changes in the background (and therefore new forms of normal experience) are able to rise…. Canguilhem's error theory fills this gap" (Gutting 2002, 80).

92). Furthermore, Foucault does not need to share Canguilhem's thesis that life is information in order to share the basic conviction that the lives of human beings are staked in the formation of discourse, or that conceptual "errors" can be traced back to the vital struggles of individuals.[35] It is possible that Foucault hews closer to the minimal, virtually tautological definition of life provided by the hero of *The Birth of the Clinic*, Marie-François-Xavier Bichat: "Life is the totality of functions that resist the absence of life" (cited in Foucault 1994a, 145).[36] But Foucault is certainly in agreement with Canguilhem's inversion of the phenomenology of the subject and his thesis that knowing (and therefore erring) is prior to any sort of "lived experience." In fact, I would contend that Foucault takes this thesis further by politicizing it. That is to say, if for Canguilhem "error" is a biological concept, in his adaptation of it Foucault transforms it into a "biopolitical" one.

Biopolitics

Foucault provides his most precise definition and distillation of the concept of "biopolitics" at the end of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (Foucault 1990a). Here, he argues that modern states are not primarily concerned with their capacity to kill – as in the classical model of sovereignty – but with their ability to foster life, to manage the health, wealth, and growth of their populations. States (in strategic cooperation with non-state organizations) accomplish this through two basic policies: "an *anatomo-politics of the human body*" that programs subjects to be disciplined, docile, and productive members of society; and "a *bio-politics of the population*" that

[35] In fact, Nikolas Rose casts doubt on Canguilhem's thesis, observing that in current biology the genetic code is no longer seen as the "key" to understanding all biological phenomena (Rose 2007, 44ff.).

[36] Deleuze writes: "From *The Birth of the Clinic* on, Foucault admired Bichat for having invented a new vitalism by defining life as the set of those functions which resist death" (Deleuze 1988, 93).

intervenes on matters such as birth and death rates, life expectancy, and other public health issues (ibid., 139). In this strategic context of "biopolitics" – an intensely normalizing apparatus that disciplines individual subjects and categorizes them according to statistical, population-level norms – the everyday life of citizens becomes the object of strategic formations of knowledge and power.

This conception of "biopolitics," it is important to recognize, is very strongly influenced by Canguilhem's understanding of normality. For him, as detailed above, normality in the biological sense refers not to statistical regularities but to the state of being of an individual organism. Hence, when institutions attempt to "normalize" individuals, to impose discipline on them or to correct for their abnormalities, "norm" becomes a "political concept" (Foucault 2003a, 50).

Just as the operation of "biopolitics" is illuminated by reference to Canguilhem's work on the norm, I would suggest that the notion of resistance to biopolitical techniques of "normalization" can be clarified by reference to Canguilhem's concept of "error." This concept allows us to see how individuals who have been singled out as "abnormal" may resist the subjectivation process of normalization through the self-formation – adaptation – of an "erroneous" form of subjectivity. This adaptive tactic would be a way for the "abnormal" individual in question to maintain a normal (internal, biological) state of being in resistance to normalizing (external, political) institutional forces.

Exhumed from the Archives: The Erroneous Lives of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin

Foucault's "dossiers" concerning two obscure historical figures, Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin, provide a chance to test my contention that the possibility of resistance to

biopolitical techniques of normalization may be better understood vis-à-vis Canguilhem's concept of "error." Both dossiers concern nineteenth-century Frenchmen, the first a parricide whose sanity was doubted, the second a hermaphrodite raised as a girl in a convent but upon adulthood compelled to identify as a man. Both contain the autobiographies of their subject in addition to official documents written by the authorities tasked with administering their cases. The discrepancy between these subjective and objective documents is the central conflict in both cases.

Pierre Rivière

In a small village in Normandy on June 3, 1835, Pierre Rivière, a 20-year-old peasant "held to be an idiot in his village and even throughout the parish" brutally murdered his mother, his sister, and his little brother with a pruning bill (Foucault, ed. 1975, 25). During interrogation, he initially played the role of a "dour fanatic" compelled by "religious mania" to commit his crimes, claiming that he had simply "obeyed God" (ibid., 18, 23). But he soon gave that up, confessing that he had committed the crime to save his father "from an evil woman who had plagued him continually ever since she became his wife" (ibid., 23-24). Upon the request of the judge, Rivière wrote all this down in a very detailed and apparently sane memoir. This complicated the argument from the defense, namely that Rivière was insane. Despite this difficulty, Rivière's initial death sentence was afterwards commuted to life in prison, where on October 20, 1840, he hanged himself.

Foucault and his collaborators stumbled across Rivière's case while researching "the practical relations between psychiatry and criminal justice" (ibid., vii). What interested them was the conflict exposed by the different accounts of the case. The judge and jury reached different conclusions from the medical experts, who disagreed amongst themselves, as did the witnesses; meanwhile no one knew what to make of Rivière's astonishing document, which he had originally

conceived as his "bid for glory," however much he later repented his crime. As Foucault recalls it:

> I think what committed us to the work, despite all our differences of interests and approaches, was that it was a "dossier," that is to say, a case, an affair, an event that provided the intersection of discourses that differed in origin, form, organization, and function – the discourses of the cantonal judge, the prosecutor, the presiding judge of the assize court, and the Minister of Justice; those too of the country general practitioner and of Esquirol; and those of the villagers, with their mayor and parish priest; and, last but not least, that of the murderer himself. All of them speak, or appear to be speaking, of one and the same thing; at any rate, the burden of all these discourses is the occurrence on June 3. But in their totality and their variety they form neither a composite work nor an exemplary text, but rather a strange contest, a confrontation, a power relation, a battle among discourses and through discourses…. I think the reason we decided to publish these documents was to draw a map, so to speak, of those combats, to reconstruct these confrontations and battles, to rediscover the interaction of those discourses as weapons of attack and defense in the relations of power and knowledge (ibid., x).

In brief, the case is an exemplary document for Foucault's archaeological/genealogical method. It is apparent that the various discourses – from the juridical and psychiatric to general medical practice and lay opinion – speak of the "same" event in different ways that result in different conclusions. In particular, the "dossier" captures a moment of epistemic instability in which the competence of legal authorities is placed in question by the scientific discourse of psychiatric experts.

But what is more, and what is interesting for our purposes, is that at the very center of this struggle between forms of power-knowledge is a "village idiot" who writes an account of his crime that resists categorization. His memoir is a singular, "*undecidable*" document that defied the discourses that tried to grasp it (ibid., 285). The various experts assembled on the case – legal, medical, psychiatric – could not agree whether its lucidity was proof or disproof of Rivière's madness.

It was the second half of Rivière's memoir, which details his own life and thoughts, where all the attention was focused, and where some found conclusive evidence of his insanity. To be sure, he corroborates many statements from witnesses regarding his life-long "bizarre behavior:" battling cabbages (ibid., 28, 101), avoiding women as if they were the devil (ibid., 29, 102-103), inventing instruments of torture for birds and frogs (ibid., 32, 103-104), and frightening children with threats of violence and death (ibid., 32-35). However, Rivière also explains these bizarre behaviors. His malice toward cabbages, for instance, was the product of a playful imagination: "since I had read some things about armies, I imagined our cabbages drawn up in battle array, I appointed leaders, and then I broke down some of the cabbages to show they were dead or wounded" (ibid., 101). Though his cruel and violent tendencies are undoubtedly disturbing, one is not led ineluctably to the conclusion that Rivière was mad. For instance, the parish priest, Jean-Louis Suriray, noting Rivière's "aptitude for science and a most remarkable memory," offered his opinion that Rivière simply seemed "to have *a skew in his imagination*" and "[c]ertainly no one would have thought anything more of it had it not been for the murders he has committed" (ibid., 26).

Indeed, according to Rivière's own account, it was his powerful imagination – his "delusions of grandeur" – that led him astray. From youth, he was preoccupied with thoughts of glory. However, "[d]espite the ideas of glory I cherished," he writes, "I loved my father very much, his tribulations affected me sorely" (ibid., 104). This anguish led Rivière to funnel his desire for glory into an act of self-sacrifice for his father. "I wished to defy the laws," he writes, "it seemed to me that it would be a great glory to me, that I should immortalize myself by dying for my father" (ibid., 105). He recalls: "I thought that an opportunity had come for me to raise myself, that my name would make some noise in the world, that by my death I should cover myself

with glory, and that in time to come my ideas would be adopted and I should be vindicated" (ibid., 108).

However, a "glorious death" eluded Rivière, and his reasons for his crime were taken by some as indubitable evidence of his madness rather than any justification of his "noble" sacrifice. Part of this is no doubt due to the fact that his "delusions of grandeur" convinced him that his life story would one day be placed alongside Jesus Christ and Napoleon Bonaparte. It must not be forgotten that Rivière was nothing but a simple peasant – and a "village idiot" at that – of no world-historical importance. Thus, rather than entering the pantheon of great heroes, his story found its home among the broadsheets of the day, which recorded the lives and lamentations of lowly villains.

Foucault links Rivière's bid to enter history with the broader struggle over "the right to kill and be killed and the right to speak and narrate" that took hold over France in the wake of its revolutionary struggles (ibid., 206-207). This is the sense in which Rivière was an "erroneous subject:" he was delusional enough to conceive that he, a peasant from a remote village, was a part of history. In his "bid for glory," he was surely rejected; but at the same time this "erroneous subject" resisted all attempts by the legal, medical, and psychiatric authorities to "subjectivate" him.

Hence, we are led to conclude alongside Foucault that Rivière "accomplished his crime at the level of a certain discursive practice and of the knowledge bound up with it" (ibid., 208-209). "For a long time," writes Foucault elsewhere, "only the actions of great men had merited being told without mockery: only blood, birth, and exploit gave a right to history" (Foucault 2000, 169). This began to change when power turned its attention to everyday life in the gradual passage through "what might be called 'society's threshold of modernity:'" biopolitics (Foucault 1990a,

143). It was not, of course, the intention of the biopolitical apparatus to glorify everyday life. Its purpose was simply to administer it. But this purpose was subverted by figures like Rivière, who resisted being "subjectivated" and demanded, naïvely, to speak and be heard. Though rejected in his "bid for glory," Rivière was nonetheless impossible to dismiss: he was a "limit case" whose "erroneous subjectivity" eluded definitive categorization by the authorities who administered his case.

Herculine Barbin

Herculine Barbin's "dossier" tells a similar story of "erroneous subjectivity." A hermaphrodite identified at birth as "female" and raised in an orphanage for girls run by nuns, s/he was compelled by law to identify as a "male" following a medical examination at age twenty-two. Obligated to abandon h/er post as a schoolmistress and adopt a masculine trade, s/he lived out a precarious and profoundly lonely existence before committing suicide at the age of thirty, "asphyxiating himself with carbon dioxide in a wretched room located on the sixth floor of a house in the rue de l'Ecole-de-Médecine" (Foucault, ed. 2010, 128). H/er memoirs were found by h/er body.

They were written when s/he was twenty-five, several years after becoming a man in the eyes of the law. But, as Foucault notes, "[i]t is not a man who is speaking, trying to recall his sensations and his life as they were at the time when he was not yet 'himself'" (ibid., xiii). Instead, "what she evokes in her past is the happy limbo of a non-identity, which was paradoxically protected by the life of those closed, narrow, and intimate societies where one has the strange happiness, which is at the same time obligatory and forbidden, of being acquainted with only one

sex" (ibid.).[37] S/he identifies herself only as "I," referring to h/er social roles as "*he*" or "*she*" in italics.

In this way, Barbin refuses to reveal h/er "true" sex, h/er "real" sexual identity. But "[d]o we *truly* need a *true sex*?" Foucault asks in the preface (ibid., vii). "With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative," he answers (ibid.). While "[f]or centuries, it was quite simply agreed that hermaphrodites had two," "biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals," he contends (ibid., vii-viii). The story of Barbin is a case in point. Although bearing the sexual features of both a man and a woman, it was determined by medical experts that "truly" s/he was a man and that h/er whole previous life as a woman had been a life led in error. But for h/er, the "error" of h/er brief and unfortunate life was instead that h/er "place was not marked out in this world" (ibid., 3).

"I am only twenty-five years old," h/er memoir begins, "and, although I am still young, I am beyond any doubt approaching the hour of my death" (ibid.). "I have suffered much," s/he cries, "and I have suffered alone! Alone!" (ibid.). Even as a child, s/he writes, s/he "loved solitude," "instinctively [drawing] apart from the world, as if [s/he] had already come to understand that [s/he] was to live in it as a stranger" (ibid.). The life s/he describes, despite the "delicious calm" of the religious house in which s/he was raised and the "pure and true" hearts she

[37] Judith Butler – rightly – criticizes Foucault's "romantic" view of Barbin's childhood, which he naïvely portrays as free from power-knowledge constructs of sex and gender (Butler 2006, 128-139).

knew there, is that of a lonely, misunderstood soul – not someone living in error and confusion (ibid.).

Two events definitively marked Barbin's sense of self: h/er first love, around the age of twenty, and the medical examination and subsequent legal rectification of h/er sex at twenty-two. H/er first love was Mademoiselle Sara, with whom s/he directed a boarding school for girls. "That sweet girl," s/he recounts, "who had become my companion, my sister – I had made my *mistress*!!!" (ibid., 54). However, s/he quickly rejoins, "Was I guilty, criminal, because a gross mistake had assigned me a place in the world that should not have been mine?" (ibid.). In this impossible situation, s/he was known to Madame P., Sara's mother, as her "dear *daughter*," "*Mademoiselle* Camille," while Sara called her "*[m]on cher* Camille" (ibid., 58-59). "In our deliciously intimate conversations," s/he explains, "she took pleasure in using masculine qualifiers for me, qualifiers which would later suit my official status," s/he adds (ibid., 58). What this brief vignette of Barbin's love life shows us is that s/he identifies fully neither as "female" nor as "male."

But this was an impossibility at a time when scientific opinion held that "hermaphroditism does not exist in man and the higher animals" (ibid., 139). Hence, that fateful day when Barbin finally decided to have a medical examination after having suffered from frequent pains in h/er groin, h/er doctor was forced to come to a conclusion. "Give me your hand, *mademoiselle*," he said, "before long, I hope we shall call you differently" (ibid., 78). And to Barbin's mother, who had come along for the visit, he offered: "It's true that you've lost your daughter, but you've found a son whom you were not expecting" (ibid.). Now that the "truth" was out in the open, Barbin had no choice but to "rectify" h/er civil status, quit her post, end things with Sara, and begin life as a "man."

This new life as a man proved impossible. Unable to find steady work, and never at ease in the world of men, Barbin began to envision death as h/er "homeland" and to yearn for its arrival (ibid., 103). "When that day comes," s/he writes, "a few doctors will make a little stir around my corpse; they will shatter all the extinct mechanisms of its impulses, will draw new information from it, will analyze all the mysterious sufferings that were heaped up on a single human being" (ibid.).

H/er resentments extended far past the doctors, however, to include society at large, and particularly the "loving couples" s/he would see when walking alone down the Left Bank (ibid., 106). "I, who am called a man," s/he writes, "have been granted the intimate, deep understanding of all the facets, all the secrets, of a woman's character," which the "mental powers" of a man do not allow him to understand, for "his happiness depends on his stopping short" (ibid., 106-107). "Looking down from the height of [h/er] proud independence, [s/he] establish[ed] [h/er]self as a judge," heaping scorn upon the falsity and limitations of the relations between men and women (ibid., 106). However, unable to be "an actor in the comedy" h/erself and doomed to a life of loneliness, Adélaïde Herculine Barbin – "Abel" – ended h/er life at thirty, in February 1868 (ibid.).

Neither woman nor man, but compelled by turns to live as one and then the other, the story of Herculine Barbin is that of one whose "erroneous subjectivity" had no place in the social order. According to the science of the time period, there was no third sex: one was either male or female. Thus, when h/er "true" sex was discovered, h/er position in society changed overnight. However, her story is also one of resistance: Barbin was never successfully "subjectivated" by medicine or the law. S/he formed h/er own "erroneous subjectivity" from what s/he recognized as h/er "exceptional situation," and s/he maintained it in "proud independence" of social norms (ibid., 106).

Conclusion

Foucault's methodological innovations challenge the phenomenology of the subject. Foucault contends that we can only experience what it is possible for us to know, and that this latter possibility is determined by the specific historical context in which we live – our "episteme." From this perspective, if there is such a thing as "the human condition," it is the minimal condition that we are condemned to "err," that is, to try to adapt to our environment by endlessly revising our concepts. There is no universal human condition aside from this ignorant striving. To err is human.

This view of the human condition emphasizes the politics of knowledge. Typically, "truth" is thought to be neutral, the result of a disinterested investigation into the nature of things. But from Foucault's perspective, truth is a product of human "error." This does not mean that all truths are equal. Some discourses are more rigorous and sophisticated – and thus "truer" – than others. But it does mean that the process of arriving at truth is a contingent and endlessly contestable process. If "erring" is driven by our need to adapt, then truth becomes a tool in the struggle to survive.

The dossiers discussed above illustrate this "erroneous" struggle. They depict the fight between "abnormal" individuals, trying to adapt to a society that cannot incorporate them, and institutions, which seek to secure the overall health of the population. These individuals oppose their truth to the official truth, and in doing so transgress the epistemic "boundaries" of their world. In particular, they provide a counter-interpretation of their own actions that recasts their own identity.

However, the point of Foucault's dossiers is not to vindicate these individuals. He does not declare that Rivière or Barbin told the "truth," or privilege their subjective experience over the

objective documents of the legal, medical, and psychiatric officials who administered their cases. Instead, the point is to show how our lives take shape in discourse, how our identities are decided through the categorization and interpretation of what we do. In other words, Foucault's dossiers are prime documents of the second-order politics of biography, i.e. the politics of *biographizing* itself.

This second-order politics of biography complicates the first-order politics of biography. The first-order politics of biography, following Arendt, is simply that what we do makes us who we are. The second-order politics of biography does not discount the first, but it reveals that things are not so simple. It is not simply what we do, but how what we do is interpreted and conceived, that makes us who we are. This means that identity is an artifact of discourse, not a natural object. An individual may be identified in different and contradictory ways through different discursive forms.

In addition, the second-order politics of biography calls attention to biographizing itself. If we may no longer consider biography to be the straightforward transcription of life's events but must instead consider it to be an artifact of discourse, this makes biographizing itself political. Whether operating in conformity to standard discursive practice or counter to it, biographizing is implicated in the politics of identification. Foucault's dossiers lay out the stakes of this politics: it is not just if an individual is remembered, it is also a question of "who" they are remembered to be.

In the next chapter, we will continue this line of thought in engagement with Jacques Rancière. Like Foucault, Rancière focuses on the politics of discourse. However, in his own biographical work he does not content himself with revealing the politics of biographizing. Instead, he engages in this politics directly, in an attempt to "democratize" the genre of biography.

4 – Life, Literarity, and Equality for All: Biography as Democracy in Jacques Rancière

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Foucault's archaeological/genealogical method demonstrates that identity is an artifact of discourse. We become who we are, not simply through what we do, but through how what we do is framed and understood in discursive terms. It is possible for the "same" action to be understood in several different and even contradictory ways. Foucault's dossiers, documenting the lives of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin, illustrate this clearly.

This brings us to the second-order politics of biography, or the politics of *biographizing*. For Arendt, biography is political because it identifies individuals with the actions they have taken. For Foucault, biography is political because the act of identification itself is political. Biographizing is not a neutral activity but a political process of selecting and encoding individual lives.

In this chapter, I focus on the politics of biographizing by engaging with Jacques Rancière. In theory and practice, Rancière has sought to "democratize" the genre of biography. This means that he argues that all human lives are equal and that all human beings are capable political actors. Notably, he develops this argument in contradistinction to Arendt, Agamben, and Foucault. This helps us, not only to pinpoint Rancière's position, but to work through some latent problems as well.

Let us work backwards and begin with Foucault. Though he was trained by Louis Althusser (Rancière 2011a), in some ways it seems that Rancière's thought is Foucauldian. He himself describes some of his key concepts as a "translation" and "appropriation" of Foucault's (Guénoun, Kavanagh and Lapidus 2000, 13). They both conceive of the social world as discursive

practice. Yet, Rancière insists that he differs from Foucault in theoretical and political orientation. In one interview, he states that it is "the question of equality – which for Foucault had no *theoretical* pertinence – that makes the difference between us" (ibid., 13). In another, he says that Foucault's "conception of politics is constructed around the question of power, that he was never drawn theoretically to the question of political subjectivation" (Rancière 2010, 93). In other words, Rancière portrays himself as a democratic theorist in contrast to Foucault, a theorist of domination.

Nonetheless, Rancière recognizes the powerful "subversive potential" in Foucault's work (Bowman and Stamp, eds. 2011, 247). He is referring to "its capacity to problematize the conflict of *lives*" that occurs when individuals transgress the limits of social order (ibid.). I emphasized this point myself in the previous chapter and illustrated it with the dossiers of Rivière and Barbin. Rancière seizes this transgressive aspect of Foucault and downplays Foucault's emphasis on limits. He claims that "the aspect of Foucault's thinking that [he's] been able to turn into [his] own is that which first asks itself *how* such a thought is thinkable and *who* can think it" (ibid., 246). But he maintains that whereas "Foucault thinks in terms of limits, closure, and exclusion," he thinks "in terms of internal division and transgression" (Guénoun, Kavanagh and Lapidus 2000, 13). In short, Rancière adapts Foucault's methods and turns them to his own political ends: democratic revolt.

Rancière's complaint that this subversive element in Foucault's thought "has been nullified by the dominant discourse about Foucault today, the biopolitical discourse," does much to explain Rancière's hostility to Agamben (Bowman and Stamp, eds. 2011, 247). Agamben exaggerates precisely the tendencies in Foucault's thought that Rancière wishes to avoid: he transforms Foucault's historical study of biopower into a philosophical study of sovereignty's grip on life. As we have seen, this understanding of biopolitics leaves little room for the development of political

subjects. In fact, Agamben advocates the renunciation of selfhood and the retreat from actuality to the undetermined realm of pure potentiality. But as I have argued, this retreat into potentiality is not able to deal adequately with the fact that we must nonetheless live our lives in the real world. Therefore, I agree with Rancière that Agamben's take on Foucault's biopolitics leads us to a dead end.

In addition to this, Rancière is critical of the Arendtian cast of Agamben's thinking. In particular, he argues that Agamben's concept of "bare life" falls into an "ontological trap:" it excludes the victims of sovereign violence, having been reduced to "mere life," from politics (Rancière 2010, 67). This is the same move that Arendt makes, Rancière argues, when she carves out an exclusively political space – the public realm – free "from contamination by the private, social or a-political life" (ibid.). Rancière is fiercely critical of this gesture. His own political manifesto, "Ten Theses on Politics," was written "as a critique of the Arendtian idea of a specific political sphere and a political way of life" (Bowman and Stamp, eds 2011, 3). For him, there is no such thing as a specifically political sphere or a purely political type of action. To the contrary, he contends that "[t]here is politics when the boundary separating those who are born for politics from those who are born for the 'bare' life of economic and social necessity is put into question" (ibid.).

Rancière's critique of Arendt is particularly compelling when we consider it alongside his essay, "The Historian, Literature and the Genre of Biography" (Rancière 2011d, 168-182). Here, he argues that the classical conception of biography as a plot composed from an individual's actions is exclusionary because the vast majority of human beings do not have the privilege of acting. Instead, they toil and suffer in obscurity while the illustrious few decide the course of history.

Though he does not actually mention Arendt in this essay, there is no doubt that it lays a heavy charge on her thinking: if she argues that action is what makes human life "biographable," then most human beings have no life story and live less than fully human lives. Like animals, they are condemned to the anonymous reproduction of the species. This critique is quite damning, and thus I would agree with Rancière that democratizing biography requires us to rethink political action.

In this chapter, I take up this task through an examination of Rancière's work, beginning with a discussion of Rancière's polemical definition of politics as democratic disruption. According to him, politics is an extraordinary moment of political equality that subverts the ordinary reality of social inequality. He names this ordinary reality the "police" and shows how it maintains itself by presenting a seamless vision ("partition of the sensible") of the way things are. Politics happens when individuals begin to see things differently and transgress the "police" order. The root cause of these transgressive moments, in Rancière's account, is the human condition of "literarity," which is the notion that language circulates freely between human beings. Because the circulation of language cannot be controlled, Rancière argues, neither can its use, and politics happens when people make free use of words to open up new perspectives and new ways of living.

In the last section of this chapter, I demonstrate this through a reading of Rancière's *Proletarian Nights*, which recounts the lives of several 19th-century French "worker-poets" who were politicized through their exposure to literature and inspired to invent new ways of living. In addition, this book is a fine example of what a "democratized" biography would look like: Rancière takes the lives of obscure, inglorious individuals, and not only restores them to their name, but in addition shows how they were political subjects despite not being "actors" in the traditional sense.

Rancière's Politics

"Politics exists," writes Rancière, "when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, 11). "Beyond this set-up," he continues, "there is no politics. There is only the order of domination or the disorder of revolt" (ibid., 12). In this section, I will unpack this provocative and polemical definition of politics and in the process elaborate upon Rancière's concepts of the "partition of the sensible" and the "police."

Rancière does not define politics as the exercise of power, the delegation of authority, or the creation and maintenance of public order. In fact, his definition contradicts these common-sense ideas. He identifies politics as the disruption, destabilization, and delegitimation of the status quo. Citing Aristotle's notion of "political rule," Rancière argues that politics happens when people "partake" (*avoir-part*) in rule with complete disregard to the notion of qualifications, such as age, birth, class, sex, race, education, merit, etc. (Rancière 2010, 27). When people do not partake in rule but simply allow the social order to be managed by those qualified, politics is dispensed with altogether. Rancière identifies the everyday activities of such management as "police."

This is a provocative claim, to say the least. According to Rancière, most of what we consider political is in fact the opposite: it belongs to the "police" suppression of politics. In the plainest terms, the concept of "police" refers to any given social order. Social orders delegate and legitimate a hierarchy of positions, promulgate laws, and enforce them. They put people in their place.

However, the power of the police is subtler than "the truncheon blows of law and order" (Rancière 1999, 28). Its power lies in its ability to present a seamless vision of the way things are.

As Samuel Chamber emphasizes, "[a] police order is not just an abstract order of powers (of laws or principles), it is '*an order of bodies* that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable' (Rancière 1999: 29, emphasis added)" (Chambers 2013, 42).

Put differently, the power of the police lies in its ability to establish "consensus" and prevent what Rancière calls "dissensus." These terms refer to the "partition of the sensible." Rancière coined this phrase, but to explain it, he turns to Foucault: "The idea of the partition of the sensible is no doubt my own way of translating and appropriating for my own account the genealogical thought of Foucault – his way of systematizing how things can be visible, utterable, and capable of being thought" (Guénoun, Kavanagh and Lapidus 2000, 13). As we discussed in the previous chapter, Foucault developed his archaeological/genealogical methods to analyze the entwinement of forms of knowledge and relations of power and how the discourses that result determine the subjective experiences of individuals. Rancière's "partition of the sensible" takes its inspiration from this and retains its emphasis on discursive practice, but to different ends. To Rancière, Foucault is too preoccupied with limits, and his "historicist's partition between the thinkable and the unthinkable seems to cover up the more basic partition concerning the very right to think" (ibid.). In short, Rancière does not agree with Foucault that subjects are determined by the order of discourse. This order may be disrupted when subjects "partake" in discourse without asking.

This situation produces a "surplus of subjects" and a "surplus of objects" that unsettles the police, which operates on the assumption that it has accounted for everyone and everything (Panagia and Rancière 2000, 124). It produces "a gap in the sensible," upending the consensus

"about the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be said, [and] on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given" (ibid.). It brings disorder to the status quo.

There are two aspects to this process of dissensus: "subjectivation" and "aisthesis." "Subjectivation" is the process of becoming a political subject. In contradistinction to modern political theories such as liberalism or Marxism, Rancière argues that politics precedes the subject. Under the first of his "Ten Theses on Politics," he writes, "Politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject" (Rancière 2010, 28). More to the point, he argues that subjectivation is not a process of identification through enmeshment in apparatuses of power-knowledge, as it is in Foucault's account; nor is it a process of ideological "interpellation" as it is for Althusser.[38] To the contrary, as Samuel Chambers puts it, for Rancière "subjectivation is *dis*identification" (Chambers 2013, 104; see also Norval 2012). That is to say, individuals become political subjects when they step out from the role by which they are identified in the police order of which they are a part. Consider, for example, a worker in a factory who walks away from the assembly line. They have stepped away from their "place" in the social order. At this point, the worker occupies a place – a subject position – for which there is no account. This is what a "surplus of subjects" means.

These surplus subjects produce in turn a surplus of objects through "aisthesis." Put plainly, "aisthesis" is the sensory stimulation one receives from the world and the "picture" of the world that they present. Under normal circumstances, this picture is enframed by and encoded in accordance with the partition of the sensible established by the police. However, disorderly political subjects start to see things in a different light. This may lead them to question or challenge

[38] Refer to Althusser 2001, 85-126, as well as Rancière 2011a for Rancière's critique of Althusser.

the way things are. At any rate, it emancipates these individuals from the "system of self-evident facts of sense perception" (Rancière 2004c, 12). "Emancipation begins," writes Rancière, "when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins," he continues, "when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions" (Rancière 2009c, 13). When the act of aisthesis confirms the police partition of the sensible, it shares in consensus, but when it disputes this consensus, it generates dissensus. Rancière describes dissensus as "the putting of two worlds in one and the same world" (Rancière 2010, 69). Though they no longer "fit," political subjects remain part of the world of the police, and from this disjointed position they repartition the sensible, thereby creating a surplus of objects.

This process of political subjectivation and dissensus is undergirded, in Rancière's account, by what we may call a "logical revolt."[39] This logical revolt is the outcome of the meeting of two logics: the police logic of inequality and the political logic of equality. According to the former, those who are unqualified should obey. According to the latter, everyone is equally qualified to rule. This is because everyone is equally intelligent; we are all equally capable of understanding.[40] This latter logic is the implicit basis of the former logic, which can only assume that inferiors are perfectly capable of understanding and carrying out the commands of their superiors. Therefore, there is an inescapable contradiction at the heart of the logic of inequality that is made manifest when individuals in unequal social positions encounter each other as equal partners in political debate.

[39] *Les Révoltes logiques* was a journal, focused on working class history, that Rancière and a group of collaborators founded in 1975. Rancière 2011e and 2012b collect his contributions to this journal.

[40] For Rancière's most extensive treatment of this axiom see his book on Joseph Jacotot (Rancière 1991).

Rancière provides Pierre-Simon Ballanche's retelling of Livy's tale of the Roman plebeians on Aventine Hill as an example. In the story, the plebeians, exhausted after fighting a war and fed up with the way things have been going, lead a revolt against the patricians. They retreat over Aventine Hill, and the patricians send an ambassador, Menenius Agrippa, to convince them to return to the city. Agrippa explains to them why their inequality is necessary by invoking the metaphor of the social body: the patricians are the stomach – the consumers – and the plebeians are the members – the producers. Unless both ranks play out their roles, the social body will starve to death. In Livy's telling, this consoles the plebeians, and after being granted a few concessions they return. In Ballanche's retelling, however, the plebeians "establish another order, another partition of the perceptible, by constituting themselves not as warriors equal to other warriors but as speaking beings sharing the same properties as those who deny them these" (Rancière 1999, 24). "Through transgression," Rancière continues, "they find that they too, just like speaking beings, are endowed with speech that does not simply express want, suffering, or rage, but intelligence" (ibid., 24-25). Debate forces the patricians to recognize the plebs as their political equals.

To sum up, politics for Rancière is a process of subjectivation through aesthetic dissensus. This process is undergirded by a logic of equality that contradicts the police logic of inequality. The outcome of this process, if it succeeds, is a repartition of the sensible and a reorganization of the police order. This repartition and reorganization will account for those uncounted by the prior police.

The Politics of Literature

In this section, we will translate Rancière's conception of politics into literary terms. In agreement with Samuel Chambers (Chambers 2005; 2013), I contend that literature and especially the concept of "literarity" play a crucial role in Rancière's political thinking. Furthermore, examining Rancière's politics from this angle helps us to see them as a mode of discursive practice.

Literarity

"Man," writes Rancière, is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words" (Rancière 2004c, 39). The power of words is their excess: "the excess of words available in relation to the thing named;" in relation to the requirements for the production of life;" and in relation to "the modes of communication that function to legitimate 'the proper' itself" (Panagia and Rancière 2000, 115). For us, this last aspect matters the most. Politics is when words circulate in an improper, unruly way.

Rancière's claim that literarity is what makes human beings political animals is intended as a fundamental critique of the tradition of Western political philosophy, aimed at Plato and Aristotle. Pursuing an argument similar to Jacques Derrida's (Derrida 1978; 1997), Rancière claims that the "'silent' word of writing" (Panagia and Rancière 2000, 115) – what he calls elsewhere "mute speech" (Rancière 2011c) – subverts the Platonic prejudice that spoken dialogue is the proper way to communicate the truth. This is because the "'orphan' system of writing" (Rancière 2004a, 104) – orphaned by its absent speaker – makes "itself equally available both to those entitled to use it and those who are not" (Panagia and Rancière 2000, 115). This "availability of a series of words lacking a legitimate speaker and an equally legitimate interlocutory," he continues, "interrupts Plato's logic of 'the proper' – a logic that requires everyone to be in their proper place, partaking in their proper affairs" (Panagia and Rancière 2000, 115). "Literarity"

refers to this undiscriminating circulation of words, whereby anyone at all may gain access to them.

To put it somewhat differently, Rancière contends that the tradition of political philosophy, whose founding father is Plato, is not about politics at all but rather the suppression of politics. Philosophizing about politics – specifying what is and what is not proper to the domain of politics – is policing. Rancière has made this critique numerous times throughout his writings, and he applies it to a long list of thinkers, but Plato is certainly his most obvious target (Rancière 1999; 2004b). Rancière repeatedly uses the example of the shoemaker in Plato's *Republic*, destined to make shoes because of the base quality of his soul, while only the worthiest souls – those deemed philosopher-kings – are destined to think and speak. To Rancière, Plato's Kallipolis suppresses politics.

Rancière makes a similar critique of Aristotle in his book most famous with his English readers, *Disagreement*. There, he begins with the passage from Aristotle's *Politics* that identifies man as a political animal due to his inability to discuss questions of right and wrong. This capacity for reasonable speech distinguishes human beings from the other animals, which can only make noise to indicate pleasure or pain. Human beings are therefore the only creatures with a moral dimension to their lives, and politics is about living the good life, reasonable and just. It is this distinction between speech and noise that Rancière rejects, seeing it as an attempt to police. "Politics exists," he contends, "because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech" (Rancière 1999, 22-23). In a society, some people are viewed as reasonable and articulate, while others are dismissed as incoherent noisemakers. "Politics exists," then, when "those who have no right to be counted as speaking

beings makes themselves of some account" (ibid., 27). Politics is the improper and unruly demonstration of reasonability by those who have been presumed incapable of reasonable speech.

This brings us to perhaps the most significant aspect of Rancière's idea of literarity, to which Samuel Chambers has drawn our attention. "It is not, contra Aristotle, our 'possession' of the logos that enables us to become political animals," writes Chambers, "it is, instead, our very 'literariness' – the fact that we are always bound up, first, within the circulations of words – that makes us always and already political" (Chambers 2005, para. 37). The point, for Rancière, is that language is not something that the human subject possesses. No one owns the words that we use. To the contrary, the words that we use possess us: through them we are constituted as speaking subjects.

Thus, Rancière's idea of literarity inverts the common-sense conception of subjectivity, in which language is conceived as a means for expressing our inner selves. For Rancière, it is the opposite: language is what brings subjects into being. It is the excess of words in circulation that causes individuals to see the world in new and unexpected ways and to develop into speaking subjects.

This inverted account of subject formation, in which language formulates the subject, not vice versa, echoes the work of Foucault. Recall that for Foucault, subjects come into being through occupying positions within a field of discursive practice. The social scripting of discourse – ranging from protocols of address to terms of discussion – positions subjects in a "grammar" that determines what is possible for them to say, do, or even think, in addition to how others relate to them.

However, there is a significant difference between how Rancière and Foucault understand the formation of subjects. As Rancière himself puts it, whereas "Foucault thinks in terms of limits,

closure, and exclusion, I think in terms of internal division and transgression" (Guénoun, Kavanagh and Lapidus 2000, 13). Though transgression is certainly a theme in Foucault's work, his consistent focus, as we have seen, is on apparatuses of power-knowledge that regulate and discipline the thoughts, actions, and relations of the human subject entrapped within them. In Rancière's terms, Foucault is interested in how discourse is policed, whereas Rancière is interested in the opposite. He focuses on the moments in which words end up in the "wrong hands," so to speak; situations in which the police order is transgressed. For him, these moments constitute politics.

Literature

In modern times, humanity's literarity is brought to the fore by "the politics of literature." "The politics of literature," Rancière clarifies, "is not the same thing as the politics of writers" (Rancière 2011d, 3). Instead, it "implies that literature does politics simply by being literature" (ibid.). Literature does a kind of politics all its own, irrespective of the personal politics of the authors who write works of literature. This is because literature produces what Rancière calls a "partition of the sensible" that "introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage" (ibid., 4).

Literature, for Rancière, is a specifically modern style of writing that he associates with writers such as Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, and Émile Zola. It is not a transhistorical, transcultural term that encompasses all written works. To the contrary, Rancière emphasizes its break with classical genres such as tragedy and comedy. To illustrate this break, he cites the appalled reaction of critics to the works of the above-mentioned authors. In their view, the novels these authors produced were monstrosities, lacking a coherent plot structure and failing

to distinguish between worthy and unworthy subjects and meaningful and meaningless descriptive details.

In short, these novels broke with what Rancière calls "the classical order of representation" (ibid., 9). The foundation of this order is Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which fiction is defined as the representation of action. Rancière argues that this definition of fiction places "men of action" in the foreground and relegates everything else to the background, if mentioned at all. Thus, the classical understanding of fiction effectively polices who can be counted as a legitimate literary subject.

The classical order of representation performs this policing in accordance with its own logic. According to Aristotle, this logic is what makes fiction superior to history: whereas history is chronological, tasked with reporting the endless, meaningless succession of events, fiction is free to dispense with chronology and dedicate itself to the representation of meaningful action. If the logic of history is "and then x… and then y… and then z," the logic of fiction is "because x, then z." It is not just a log of what happened; it reveals the meaning of an actor's fate. In this manner, Rancière observes, fiction sets "the causal rationality of action against the empirical nature of life" (ibid.). To the classical order of representation, everyday life is meaningless. Life is meaningful only when it transcends the everyday. To live a meaningful life is to accomplish heroic feats. Hence, this logic establishes a hierarchy of human lives that honors only those who are worthy.

Modern literature levels this hierarchy between worthy, dignified lives and their opposite. Pursuing an argument broadly similar to that of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (Auerbach 2003), Rancière claims that what distinguishes modern from classical literature is that it depicts ordinary life. This embrace of the everyday is not compelled by a sense of compassion or a democratic love

of the people, but by the "absolutization of style" that is the outcome of aestheticism, of "art for art's sake" (Rancière 2011d, 11).[41] Gustave Flaubert is the perfect example of this. Though no democrat himself, critics despaired at the democratic "excess" of his novels, in which "everything is on the same plane and where everything has to be described" (ibid., 39). This excess was not the result of Flaubert's politics but rather of his literary style, which he understood as "an *absolute* way of seeing things" (Rancière 2004a, 148). As Rancière interprets this idea, by "absolute" Flaubert means a style that has been "freed" from the classical order of representation. Modern literature liberates itself from the logic of action and aspires to fully describe reality in all of its facets.

Ironically, Rancière agrees with Flaubert's reactionary critics that the consequence of his aestheticism is a kind of literary democracy. The difference, of course, is that Rancière celebrates it. Modern literature, with its indifference and impropriety, makes it possible to write about anyone or anything as if they were all equal. More than that, this indifference and impropriety extends to the production and circulation of texts: if anything can be written about, then anyone at all can write literature, and anyone at all can read it. In thus fashion, the putative snobbery of aesthetes underwrites a democratic revolution in the subject matter, production, and circulation of literature.

The further irony of Rancière's agreement with reactionary literary critics is that this puts him at odds with trenchant critics of the bourgeoisie such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes. Rancière's essay, "The Politics of Literature," is in part a rebuttal to Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (Sartre 1988). In that book, Sartre characterizes Flaubert as a neurotic aristocrat who sought to

[41] Of course, modern aestheticism extends far beyond literature and include the fine arts, cinema, etc. In addition to his works on literature (Rancière 2004a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2017), Rancière has written numerous books and essays on art (2004c, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2013a, 2013b).

preserve the purity of literature by hiding it away in a "secret garden" inaccessible to the masses (Rancière 2011d, 7-8). According to Sartre, the notion of "art for art's sake" betrays a desire to keep the people – with their politics and their practical concerns – from corrupting the purity of art. The nihilism and decadence of Flaubert's works, like *Madame Bovary*, stems from this desire. But in this supposed nihilism and decadence, Flaubert's contemporary critics – and Rancière with them – detect a profound indifference to the rank and order of things that has a "democratizing" effect.

For Rancière, this democratizing effect is more significant – and closer to the truth of the matter – than Roland Barthes' idea of "the reality effect" (Barthes 1989, 141-148). In his essay, "Madame Aubain's Barometer," Rancière challenges Barthes' reading of Flaubert's short story, "A Simple Heart" (Rancière 2017, 3-25). In the story, Flaubert's description of the house of Madame Aubain includes a sketch of her piano, above which hangs a barometer. Both Barthes and Rancière agree, this barometer is a "useless" detail – unlike Chekhov's gun, it will never be used by any of the characters in the story – but they disagree about the message that it sends readers. Barthes argues that its purpose is ideological: it is to impose the reality of the bourgeois order, with all its weight, upon the imagination of the reader. Through detailing the endless clutter of bourgeois domesticity, modern works of literature reinforce the inescapability of the bourgeois order.

In Rancière's view, however, useless details like Madame Aubain's barometer have the opposite effect: such a surplus of objects unsettles conventional criteria of importance and meaning. When there is no reason anymore not to include a pointless description of a barometer, there is no reason anymore not to include a description of anything whatsoever – all things are equal.

This equality by way of indifference extends to the characters that populate literature as well. In his essay, "Literary Misunderstanding," Rancière gives the example of Madame Sazerat from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Henri Ghéon, a critic and contemporary of Proust, complains about this character, whose presence in the story has no point. But for Rancière, her very pointlessness is precisely the point: in modern literature, anyone can be a character. Proust has his reasons for including Madame Sazerat in his book – "I put Madame Sazerat in front of [the stained glass window of a church] to accentuate the human feel of the church at such an hour" (Hodson, ed. 1997, 24; quoted in Rancière 2017, 35) – but they have nothing to do with classical order of representation. Madame Sazerat is not part of the action and she adds nothing to the plot.

Thus, for Rancière, modern literature promises more than just bourgeois ideology – much more. In the name of style, it democratizes fiction, making it possible to depict anything or anyone. Furthermore, this indifference extends to the production and circulation of literature: books are circulated among an anonymous reading public, meaning that anyone at all may happen upon them. Thus, in turn, anyone at all, having been exposed to literature, may pick up a pen and write.

Biography as Democracy

To democratize biography is to recognize the equality of human lives, and this, Rancière argues, means that "[t]he division between two kinds of 'life' has to be overruled" (Rancière 2011d, 174). This is the division between the active, glorious lives of the great and the passive, humdrum lives of the common. To overcome this division between lives worth remembering and those that are not, Rancière argues that biographers must adopt the perspective of modern literature. From this perspective, anyone at all is a valid subject. This is because the point of

modern literature is not to isolate action from the rest of reality but instead to depict life in all its facets.

As Rancière puts it, literature is not only concerned with the "*what*" of life – what people say and do, what events mark their lives – but also the "*how*" – the manner in which they live their lives (ibid., 178). This "how" includes an individual's thoughts, feelings, and sensibilities. Thus, if the "what" is the objective side of existence, the "how" is subjective. It concerns the lived experience of the subject. Because this subjective aspect is not easily verifiable as fact, it is suspected as fiction, and modern scientific histories avoid it and limit themselves to the "what." For the same reason, the reputation of the genre of biography, which cannot help but be concerned with the "how" of life, is tarnished. Despite all the proofs it can summon to verify its depiction of the "how" of life – diary entries, letters, etc. – biography cannot escape its association with literary fiction.

The solution to this problem is to turn it around and pose biography's weakness as its true strength. To do this, Rancière argues, biography must "control its duplicity… by means of writing procedures that are based on the indistinguishability of the reason behind facts and the reason behind fictions" (ibid., 179). In other words, biography must, through some critical technique, cancel the difference between subjective and objective facts. Rancière identifies three ways to do this.

The first technique is to attempt to depict subjective experience using objective facts alone. Alain Corbin takes this approach to its logical extreme in *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France* (Corbin 2001). This book tries to imagine the "lifespace" of Louis-François Pinagot (1798-1876), whose birth and death certificates are the only evidence of his existence. To recreate Pinagot's world, Corbin surveys

demographics of the village where he lived, forestry records concerning the nearby forest, and information about his family and trade alongside more general historical information concerning the regional dialect and the impact of world events on the remote and impoverished province of France in which he lived. By Corbin's own admission, this assemblage of data cannot be considered "a biography of Louis-François Pinagot, which has turned out to be impossible to write," but "an evocation" of his life (ibid., 211-212). The irony is that this flips the historian's concern for objectivity on its head: here, the problem is that there is no way to verify whether Corbin's "evocation," based entirely on objective data, is true. Verification requires subjective data.

The second technique is to undercut the difference between the subjective and the objective by arguing that both are artifacts of discourse. That is to say, there is no such thing as a pure "fact" or "experience" – what we call facts and experiences are both products of an epistemic framework. The point, then, is to understand the formation of subjective and objective data through discursive practice.

This is the approach that Foucault takes with the archival dossiers that he edited and published in the 1970s. As we have seen, in these dossiers he juxtaposes the memoirs of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin with documents written by the legal, medical, and psychiatric experts involved in their cases. While he does indeed contrast subjective with objective documents, the point is not to vindicate one or the other. Foucault does not see it as a contest between experience and fact; he sees it as a contest between two discourses. The point is not that Rivière or Barbin "speak truth to power," but that they provide a counter-discourse to the official discourse of that time.

The third technique is closer to the second than the first, and it is Rancière's own. It takes its inspiration from modern literature and its capacity to depict the life of anyone at all. In practice, it is the use of a free indirect discourse in which the objective and the subjective, fact and fiction, are interwoven.[42] The purpose of this interweaving is to reveal the "how" of life, that is, how, given the factual circumstances of life, one goes about living. What is interesting about this approach is that it may subvert one's preconceptions about how people relate to their historical circumstances. For instance, the working class subjects of Rancière's *Proletarian Nights* did not possess the "class consciousness" often imputed to them. They did not particularly take pride in their labor, nor see it as the most important thing. Instead, they wished that they, like the bourgeoisie, had time to write poetry and philosophize. Rancière takes their writings – letters, poems, diary entries, etc. – and compels us to take these "worker-poets" seriously as individual thinkers.

Rancière's technique makes a more democratic biography possible. His attention to the "how" of life in addition to the "what" shows us political agency in unexpected places. He is able to show us the political struggles and unruly subjectivities of individuals we are unlikely to consider. In the next section, I will illustrate these points through a reading of his *Proletarian Nights*.

The Exemplary Life of Gabriel Gauny

Having assembled the various aspects of Rancière's "politics of literature," let us illustrate them with a reading of *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*.

[42] On this style, see James Swenson, "*Style indirect libre*," in Rockhill and Watts, eds. 2009, 258-272.

We may characterize this book as a biography of sorts, albeit an unusual one. It is not a typical biography because it follows the lives of several individuals, not just one. But it is not a typical history, either – as reviews by historians attest (Chapman 1993; Gerstle 1992; Johnson 1991; Palmer 1991). This, of course, is not only due to its subject matter but also its free indirect style, with its apparent lack of objectivity due to an improper lack of distance between Rancière's authorial voice and the subjective statements of his biographical subjects. "That is why," Rancière believes, "severe theorists and historians deemed it to be literature," not history (Rancière 2012a, xi).

Beyond its unconventional style, the most striking thing about *Proletarian Nights* is its conception of working class emancipation. Casting aside the Marxist tradition in which he was trained, Rancière does not contribute to the question of how to transform a class "in itself" into a class "for itself." He intentionally avoids reifying the idea of a determinate class of people with a determinate consciousness. Instead, he emphasizes that the working class is a heterogeneous grouping composed of individuals with their own specific circumstances and perspectives on things. Furthermore, he insists that these individuals are perfectly capable of thinking for themselves and do not need any intellectuals to help them realize that they are being exploited. Thus, these individuals have the power to free themselves – intellectually, at least – from a life of laboring. Through rejecting the intellectual stultification of labor and applying their intelligence, the workers Rancière portrays carved a space of freedom for themselves out of the capitalist social order. This space of freedom is the "night" referred to in the title – the time allotted for workers to sleep and recover their labor-power, but which they devoted to poetry, philosophizing, and politics.

Of all of the figures in the book, Gabriel Gauny (1806-1889), a joiner by trade, is arguably the most central. In his introduction, Donald Reid calls Gauny Rancière's "alter ego," the one "who is able, in however incoherent, iconoclastic, and unsustainable a fashion, to preach not the rational reordering of this world, but 'the revelation of a different world and the initiation of a new kind of relationship between beings' (p. 116)" (ibid., xxxi). Indeed, Gauny has so captivated Rancière that Rancière has gone so far as to publish an entire volume of Gauny's writings (Rancière ed., 1983). What is remarkable about Gauny, to put it in Rancière's terms, is his literarity.

Let us begin with Gauny's childhood. Discussing the various ways in which his working class subjects were first exposed to literature, Rancière presents us with the story of young Gauny:

> It was agreed that my mother would save for me the sacks holding the nourishing grains that she bought. How great was my enthusiasm that evening back home as I explored those treasures of fragmentary discourse and annal remnants. How irritated and impatient I was when I got to the torn end of a page and could not pursue the narration. There was no follow-up to the first delivery of sacks and wrappings, even though she was urged to buy her lentils from the same merchant (Rancière 2012a, 50).

It is hard to imagine a more perfect illustration of Rancière's concept of "literarity" than this image. Through circulating in the most banal yet unlikely of ways – as packaging material for a dietary staple – literature found its way to Gauny, regardless of the fact that he was not its intended addressee. Furthermore, as is obvious from Gauny's prose, he was perfectly able to apply his intelligence to this literature and teach himself from it, regardless of his lack of education and status.

It was this literary experience, not mastery of his craft, that emancipated Gauny. He finds nothing liberating about laboring: "The worst of all my ills as a worker," he writes, "is the brutalizing nature of the work. It suffocates me" (ibid., 54). What is suffocating is "its abstraction,

that is, the obligation of the time spent every day in order to procure the means of subsistence for oneself" (ibid., 58). It is time spent in servitude that subtracts from one's time to be free. But the end of the workday brings no relief, because it only allows enough time to recover in order to be able to work again. In this way, work deprives Gauny "of the only good thing that remains for the common laborer – his night," devoted "to the pleasure of learning and the charm of producing" (ibid., 67). Gauny calls this night his "indefeasible right" and finds ways to steal it back for himself (ibid.).

To win back his "night," Gauny devises what he calls a "cenobitic economy" for himself. On the surface, not much about his life changes. He is still a joiner; he still labors for wages. But intellectually, and, if you will, spiritually, he frees himself from his servitude to the logic of labor. This emancipation of self involves a subtle change in perspective, a revaluation of values of sorts. The first step is paradoxical: Gauny intensifies his dependence on the tools of his trade. "Though it is an instrument of servitude," Rancière notes, "the tool is the minimal precondition if the proletarian is to have any independence" (ibid., 78). Independence is achieved by focusing on the craft alone, taking up piecework and becoming a "jobber," which allows one to work one's own hours "without master, overseer, or colleagues" (ibid.). Gauny leverages his tools to win back his time.

However, this decision involves more than taking up one's tools. It means accepting risk and living a precarious existence. In short, it means valuing time over money, freedom more than comfort. Or, put differently, it means fearing and hating scarcity less than servitude. "It is in shouldering this insecurity," Rancière writes, "that the worker can affirm an ownership of his work that does not reside in the relationship between his instruments (which are his at the master's as much as here) and his product, but primarily in the reversal of his relationship to time" (ibid., 79).

In this reversal, Gauny the pieceworker "devours time, whereas the day-laborer is devoured by it" (ibid.).

None of this implies that the pieceworker is lazy or uncommitted to their craft. In fact, in order to survive, Gauny "must operate with frenzy because piecework has only laminated recompenses" (ibid., 80). Piecework, more than any other kind of work, forces the worker to be productive. But, paradoxically, in productive "frenzy," Gauny finds release. In his solitude, he is free to enter a sort of reverie state; he is free to think without being interrupted. Gauny describes it as a mortification of the flesh that restores life to his spirit: "He mortifies his body to give flight to his soul: all unawares, this jobber is linked to the fathers of the desert by his renunciations!" (ibid.).

"Possession of self through which loss of self is reproduced; an illusion profitable to exploitation that rests on the reality of emancipation" – this is how Rancière describes Gauny's method (ibid., 82). While nothing much has changed on the outside – Gauny is still an exploited laborer who must work to live – on the inside a transformation has begun: Gauny no longer lives to work. It is through this inward transformation that Gauny emancipates himself from domination.

Once he has emancipated himself from the logic of labor, Gauny begins to see the world in a different light, and this shift shapes him as a political subject. To illustrate this, let us recount the scene in which he persuades the overseer of a panoptical prison to give him a tour of that "immense tomb" (ibid., 88). Inside, Gauny witnesses a "'mirage of torments' displayed at the 'panoptical center of the abyss', where one can completely turn around and see 'all the spokes of this wheel of torture'" (ibid.). Reflecting upon its design, Gauny is outraged at the workers who agreed to build according to such designs: "They work like beasts to earn their measure of pay

without critically examining their task… amenable to any odious work that ensures them a wage" (ibid., 95). What would be better, he suggests, is if the inventors themselves had to build these prisons, so that in their shoddy craftsmanship the madness of their designs would become apparent. It is the flawless execution of the craftsman that gives the penitentiary the veneer of good common sense.

"Our floor-layer, unfortunately, is not an orator," however, and so his thoughts find no audience (ibid., 97). But there is a way to circumvent this problem, and that again is the way of literarity. "The democrat," Gauny writes, "traverses the city, talking to himself. The sentences of his monologue capture the curiosity of passers-by [… and a] crowd surrounds the revolutionary, who, without addressing himself to anyone, seems to be haranguing a multitude" (ibid.). With his "excess of words," Gauny circulates his thoughts amongst the public, drawing them into dissensus.

Here, once more, Rancière uses Gauny to counter the received wisdom of working class politics: it is not by organizing or even articulating class interests that Gauny finds an audience. It is by randomly disseminating his thoughts in a crowd. He has no audience in mind and his indirect manner of speech may be heard by anyone at all. "As an anonymous and isolated individual," Rancière writes, "he sets off to share the spark of the spirit of revolt – of the spirit, period – with a crowd capable of catching fire precisely insofar as it is not a gathering of families, societies, classes or corporations but a pure collection of sensitive individuals" (ibid., 119). It is these "sensitive individuals" who may be diverted from their intended itinerary by the unruly circulation of words.

This selection of scenes from the life of Gabriel Gauny has shown two main things. First of all, it has given us a practical example of the politics of literarity, or the ways in which the free circulation of words leads to the intellectual emancipation and the formation of political subjects. Second, it has illustrated Rancière's politics of literature and more specifically what a more

democratic genre of biography might look like. Rancière's politics of literature involves unconventional choices of subject matter and style. In terms of subject matter, it is notable that someone such as Gabriel Gauny is not a suitable biographic subject form the classical standpoint. Gauny is not an actor, he is a worker, at best a "worker-poet" or a dreamer who lived on the margins of the working class, let alone society at large. Even a sympathetic historian of the working class would likely consider someone like Gauny too eccentric and non-representative. Hence, Rancière's choice of biographic subject defies conventional ideas about who is worthy of having their life story told. Regarding style, Rancière's use of free indirect discourse means that he does not merely report what Gauny says but actually participates in thinking with Gauny. In turn, this means that readers are compelled to think with Gauny as well. It is impossible to simply bracket and disregard what Gauny says as just a generic example of working class consciousness.

In the spirit of this kind of biographizing, it would be possible to tell the life story of anyone at all – provided there is a written trace of their existence – and to circulate their "excess of words." This sort of biography expands our democratic horizons by making previously invisible actors visible. In doing so, it restores them to historical life and acknowledges them in their singularity.

Discussion

At this point, we have examined Rancière's understanding of politics, his idea of literature, and his vision of a democratized genre of biography, of which *Proletarian Nights* is a fine example. From what I have presented, it may seem like the sky is the limit for Rancière: his talk of the equality of all human lives may have us imagining a future in which everyone counts as a political subject and everyone's life story is recorded. Perhaps it is time, then, to discuss the limits of his thought.

First, Rancière's definition of politics is partial and polemical. It is not comprehensive. He limits "politics" to disparate moments of social disruption and labels everything else "police." This excludes a vast array of activities that are usually considered political, such as holding office and voting. In a way, it is a redrawing of Arendt's divide between the political and the social, and it has the same drawbacks that Hanna Fenichel Pitkin noted in her book on Arendt (Pitkin 1998): Rancière's "police," like Arendt's concept of the "social," becomes an amorphous, catch-all "blob." The difference with Rancière is that "politics" is not a *place* distinct from its other – the "police."

This difference is important. It makes it possible to see how political moments take place *within* social orders. Rancière discovers politics in places that Arendt would never look. Arendt's valorization of the labor movement hinges on her claim that at the time "it was the only organization in which men acted and spoke *qua* men – and not *qua* members of society" (Arendt 1998, 219). Rancière, meanwhile, digs deeper into the history of the working class and finds politics in the letters, journals, and lifestyles of obscure workers on the margins of the labor movement. For him, it is not one's appearance in public that makes one political, but rather one's dissensual relation to the police "partition of the sensible." Such dissensus can be a privately held stance.

This perspective opens Rancière to obscure lives that are invisible to an Arendtian gaze. *Proletarian Nights* recovers the inglorious lives of several previously unknown "worker-poets." He recovers what they wrote and presents it to his readers as food for thought. To take these writings seriously is to participate in dissensus: to rethink the relationship between life and labor. In this way, *Proletarian Nights* is a great example of the politics of biographizing: Rancière selects lives that have been marginalized by our social order, and asks us to listen to how they see things.

However, there are nonetheless limitations to this approach. While it might embolden us to seek out the obscure lives of unknown and unexceptional figures, this effort runs up against the fact that billions of human lives have been lost to history virtually without a trace. For instance, Rancière is in no better position to rescue the life of Louis-François Pinagot than Alain Corbin. Rancière's concept of "literarity" only applies in cases where there are written traces of life. Thus, although Rancière may envision a democratized biography, this vision cannot rescue history's mute.

This limitation returns us to the differences between Rancière and Foucault. Recall that Rancière characterizes Foucault as too fixated on limits whereas Rancière stresses transgression. But this characterization is not quite accurate. Indeed, Foucault was drawn to Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin precisely because they were transgressive figures. The real difference between Foucault and Rancière, I think, is that only Rancière promises *emancipation* through transgression. The transgressive figures in Foucault's work, such as Rivière and Barbin, are not emancipated. To the contrary, precisely because they are transgressive, they are doomed to misfortune and suffering. Moreover, most often those who transgress never get tell their story in their own words. Rivière and Barbin are exceptional in this regard, but in another of Foucault's works, "The Lives of Infamous Men," he presents the brief "poem-lives" of "obscure and ill-fated" historical figures (Foucault 2000, 159). All that remains of these lives are the few summary sentences written by the authorities who sentenced them for their misdeeds. The official account is the only one we have.

None of this should cause us to dismiss Rancière's dream of a "democratized" biography. It is an admirable project and his *Proletarian Nights* proves that it is both possible and worthwhile. I am only suggesting that we should not, like Rancière, conflate transgression with emancipation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have engaged with Rancière's democratic politics of biographizing. Rancière is committed to the presumption that all human beings are equal political agents, and this leads him to argue that our traditional notion of politics – as well as our traditional notion of biography – needs to be revised. We need to rethink politics and biography such that we no longer divide humanity in two, with the active lives of the "great" on one side and the passive lives of the "common" on the other. In our democratic age, we need to recognize that we are all political agents.

Rancière's argument is at the same time a critique of all of the other authors we have read. In particular, he polemicizes against Arendt's distinction between political and social life, pressing the troubling charge that her thought depoliticizes and dehumanizes the lives of ordinary people. I discussed this problem in chapter two, when comparing Arendt's and Agamben's views on the Holocaust, but Rancière's critique is broader in scope. If he is correct about Arendt, then according to her most of humanity is not fully human. Most of us are simply "social creatures" with no story to tell.

Rancière's critique of Agamben also echoes the critical remarks I made in chapter two. Agamben tries to evade the problem of dehumanization through "desubjectification." He argues that what makes us human has nothing to do with what we do or who we are. Our "potentiality" makes us human. But this solution does not work because it cannot deal with the fact of real life. His idea of "potentiality" is an abstraction that cannot adequately account for the actual lives we live.

By comparison, Rancière's critique of Foucault is rather technical, more like an adjustment. Indeed, Rancière seems to have been greatly influenced by Foucault's thought, as mentioned

above. Like Foucault, he conceives of politics and the social world in terms of discursive practice. Both speak in terms of the "politics of knowledge" or the "politics of truth:" Foucault's archaeology/genealogy tracks the historical trajectories of formations of power-knowledge, while Rancière's politics is fundamentally concerned with the partition – and repartition – of the sensible. But where they differ is on the question of political orientation: Rancière is a committed democrat, whereas Foucault takes a more abstract, detached approach. Though both of them exhume the lives of obscure and forgotten historical figures from the archives, their objectives differ. Though Foucault documents resistance, he is interested in exhibiting how formations of power-knowledge dominate and determine the fate of individual lives. Rancière, on the other hand, emphasizes resistance, and asks us to consider the lives he restores to view not as exhibits but as interlocutors.

As I have detailed above, there are limitations to Rancière's thought. His definition of "politics" is as partial and polemical as his definition of "police" is catch-all and vague. His politics of literature, with its championing of modern achievements, has the whiff of Whig history. And his vision of a democratized biography, though more inclusive than classical biography, cannot truly promise us the possibility of recording the life of anyone at all. Only those lives that have the quality of "literarity," such as the unusual life of Gabriel Gauny, may be brought back from oblivion. Those who leave behind no written trace are still doomed to vanish from human history.

Despite these limitations, Rancière's critiques of Arendt, Agamben, and Foucault are still compelling. His vision of a "democratized" biography is inspiring, and works such as his *Proletarian Nights* pave the way. He has shown that it is possible and worthwhile to restore the lives of unknown and forgotten figures, and to dignify them as political agents. His democratic politics of biographizing compels us to take a closer look at the politics of common, ordinary life.

Conclusion

This work was prompted by the puzzle: why do political theorists bother with biography? The answer to this question, as we have developed it across the four main chapters of this work, is that biography provides us with unique insight into the relationship between action and identity. In addition, we have considered what it means to be a human being and how to enact democratic ideals.

This work was inspired by Hannah Arendt's notes on biography in *The Human Condition*. In chapter 1, we discussed her claim that "specifically human" life is "biographable." This claim comes with some counterintuitive implications: because it identifies who we are with what we do, it implies that our identity is not something personal and private but rather political and public. Furthermore, it comes with the implication that we are not and cannot be the "authors" of our own lives. Though I submit specific aspects of Arendt's ideas to critique, I agree with these crucial points.

What is dangerous about Arendt's theory is the way she ties together identity and humanity. In chapter 2, I critiqued this aspect of Arendt by way of engagement with Giorgio Agamben. Comparing their respective approaches to the question of dehumanization and the Holocaust, it became clear that only Agamben is able to see the victims of the camps as fully human beings. His idea of humanity as "potentiality" means that humans are human regardless of what happens. Though I believe this philosophy is incapable of guiding us in the actual lives that we must lead, I think Agamben is right to dissociate our humanity from our identity. The problem is that he goes too far and suggests that identity is an illusion. To the contrary, identity is real. The solution is not "disidentification" but the recognition that "who" we are and "what" we are two different things.

This recognition requires us to adopt a method that is agnostic about the human condition. In chapter 3, I suggested Michel Foucault's archaeological/genealogical method as an alternative. This method teaches us that what we experience is structured by what we know, and that what we know is conditioned by the historically specific rules of discourse we inhabit. In turn, these rules are partially conditioned by the contingent power relations that imbue any society. That is to say, Foucault helps us to understand the "politics of truth" – the fact that truth is not a neutral, ahistorical, transcendent standard but the product of historically specific discourses and struggles. In his biographical dossiers of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin, we saw how "abnormal" individuals – a parricidal "village idiot" and a hermaphroditic convent teacher, respectively – had their life stories irretrievably altered by their encounter with apparatuses of power-knowledge. This opened our eyes to the politics of biographizing itself, or the fact that it is not simply what we do that makes us who we are, but in addition how what we do is inscribed into the historical archive.

In chapter 4, the politics of biographizing became the central theme. Through engagement with Jacques Rancière, our goal was to arrive at a "democratization" of the genre of biography. This involved further criticism of Arendt, namely that her conception of the "active life" is problematic because it excludes the vast majority of human beings, who live to work and work to live. Rancière, with his ideas of "literarity" and "the politics of literature," tries to overrule this division between "active" and "passive" lives by capturing the politics of everyday life and the singular identities of ordinary people. There are limitations to this approach, as we have seen, but nonetheless his works, such as *Proletarian Nights*, are successful examples of this democratized style. Rancière teaches us that we can train our gaze to see the politics of the ordinary and the banal.

There are several broader implications for us to take away from this study of biography. First and foremost, we have learned that identity is post-hoc. We become who we are *after the fact* because we are what we do. This lesson should serve to reorient us in our political life. It teaches us that we do not enter politics as fully-formed selves; to the contrary, it is through acting that we become selves. This reversal calls into question the modern ideal of autonomy, or the notion that individuals are the self-controlled "authors" of their actions. I have argued that this is not true: that we are not the "authors" of our lives or the "masters" of our actions. Our actions – which are better understood as interactions, since they take place in a social context – determine us.

Therefore, this reversal calls into question any politics that presumes a preexisting subject. Liberalism, which begins with the individual person, is the most obvious target of this critique. But many strands of modern political theory are vulnerable: republicanism, with its ideal of popular sovereignty and the collective "we;" Marxism, with its privileging of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject; and even existentialism, with its anxiety over the "authenticity" of what we do. Against these tendencies in modern political thought, our political study of biography suggests that we should recognize our non-sovereignty and the contingent, post-hoc sources of our identity.

Ultimately, *Acts of Identity* suggests a democratic politics based on the recognition of the equality of human beings as political actors. This is not an institutional prescription so much as an aesthetic shift: by looking at the politics of biography and of biographizing, we have come to see that human beings develop singular identities through the unique courses of action they take, and furthermore that by "democratizing" biography we become better attuned to this. Though we cannot hope to record the life story of everyone who ever lived – billions of lives have already been lost to time – we can endeavor to better appreciate our democratic fellows by more closely

attending to their agency. This, in turn, will give us a better sense of ourselves, since we are part of this interactive process as well, and enhance our sense of solidarity with the actors in our lives.

Acts of Identity opens a number of possibilities for future research. I will discuss just two. One is a rereading and reappraisal of the modern classics of autobiographic politics. Rousseau, Nietzsche, Sartre, W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon – these are just a few of the many influential modern political thinkers who have written autobiographically. In doing so, they have become symbolic of modern ideals of creativity, authenticity, expressivity, and self-assertion. Rather than treating these works as authoritative statements, it might be fruitful to approach them more like Foucault's dossiers by placing them in their historical context and alongside other, "objective" documents. This would highlight the politics of identification – of (auto)biographizing – and the contest between these writers and their critics over the evaluation of the legacy of their life and works.

The second possibility is to engage directly in the politics of biographizing. Following the template laid down by Foucault's dossiers and Rancière's *Proletarian Nights*, this work would continue the "democratization" of the genre of biography by selecting the lives of the unsung and the obscure. The purpose would be to highlight the political agency of individuals who would otherwise be assumed to be the passive victims of circumstance, or whose lives are seen as too banal for words. Both Foucault and Rancière hone in on "paradoxical lives" – a "village idiot" who commits an infamous crime, a hermaphrodite in an age where it was thought an impossibility, and workers who spent their nights writing poetry instead of sleeping to recover their labor-power – that cause us to question the conceptual categories by which we classify other people's lives. In this time of heightened precariousness, overwhelming access to information, and identity politics, the biographizing of "paradoxical lives" holds potential as a powerful tool for democratic politics.

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